SPELL LAND

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR
THE GEORGE AND THE CROWN
THE END OF THE HOUSE OF ALARD
SUSSEX GORSE
GREEN APPLE HARVEST
THE TRAMPING METHODIST
STARBRACE
TAMARISK TOWN
THE CHALLENGE TO SIRIUS
LITTLE ENGLAND
JOANNA GODDEN
JOANNA GODDEN MARRIED
ISLE OF THORNS
THREE AGAINST THE WORLD
IRON AND SMOKE

Spell Land

The Story of a Sussex Farm

BY

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

"It is not known that to love one's own—that is, oneself in another—divides."—SWEDENBORG

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Spell Land

CHAPTER I

PATERNOSTER—THE STRANGER—WIDOW'S FARM

THE sun of an April swale burned on the roofs of Spell Land, the new red roof of the dwelling-house and the old red roofs of the barns. In the orchard thrushes were full-throated, and the wind rustled delicately through grass already lush with bennet.

But in the oast-house there was no sunshine, and the wind bellowed like a ram, swinging the cowl with moans, and agonizing the heart of a child who had just crept in from the hay-barn. His teeth chattered, his knees knocked together, his palms and forehead were damp, but he was man enough to conquer the coward impulse that fought to drag him back into the yard, where the cows stood ready for milking, and the voices of his brothers and their servants rang hoarsely reminiscent of every day.

To-day stood apart from that procession of momentous trivialities called Every Day. To-day was abnormal enough to throw Every Day out of course, for To-day the world of dreams was to put on flesh, and he should see his hero and his adversary face to face.

It was now some months since, walking with Christian on Forgetful Green, he had met Apollyon straddling across the way, and had forthwith made him his hero—or perhaps he was not so much a hero as an obsession, a pair of spectacles through which the child viewed life and saw all things new.

His glamour had rested chiefly on a dusty row of books, the unread apology for a library at Spell Land. His sister Dora, who added daily to her labours by making him stand at her knee and spell out " The cat is on the mat," . . . " The ox is in the box," was surprised to see her pupil shoot out of indifference into zeal and proficiency. She would not have been surprised had she seen him lying on his stomach in the orchard, poring over *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, or Cary's translation of Dante, till the musty page with its tanglewood of print became the royal gate of adventure, and, successfully skipping over polysyllabic stumbling-stones, he trod the ice-floes of Cocytus and the halls of Pandemonium.

In many ways he suffered for his infatuation. Even in the thrill of day-dreams he found it hard to forget the terror of those nights when suddenly into his sleep would be thrust a hideous, fiery head, or when he would wake in the stuffy darkness, conscious of a presence in the room other than the tossing Dora's. His " night-terrors " were never perfectly understood ; they were put down to a minor hobby of eating crab-apples, and he was duly physicked.

There was, too, another more subtle pang in his hero's train. He occasionally found himself perplexed by conflicting doctrine. How could Bunyan's winged warrior, running to and fro about the earth, be Dante's three-headed prisoner of frozen hell ? and, again, how could the hideous and monstrous Lucifer of the *Inferno* be he of whom Milton said : " His form had not lost its original brightness, nor appeared less than archangel ruined " ? He was a lonely, imaginative child, and he fretted over these discrepancies as miserably as any weak brother over the Synoptic Gospels. Then suddenly a light shone.

One day he heard it said in the whispered course of a conversation between two farm-girls that it was possible to conjure up the arch-fiend by saying the Lord's Prayer backwards. It would be hard to guess what led to this statement—a penny novel, a troublesome cow, an un-

faithful lover—it was only a seed blown on the wind of muttered confidences which women love to make and small boys are not allowed to hear; but it took root in his imagination, and at this crisis of doubt it sprouted, blossomed, and brought forth fruits of unrighteousness.

Now at last he was to see with his waking eyes the face that had terrified his dreams. He wished that the oast were not quite so dark. Suppose—but he nipped conjecture in the bud, or the faint thrill of pleasure that still stirred him would have died, and he would have been driven solely by the morbid impulse which at other times would force him to plunge a hand among stinging-nettles, or even thrust his finger into Dora's scalding-pans.

He kneeled down, and folded his hands from force of habit. The yard was now empty of men and cows, and the silence was broken only by the wind. He began to mutter, slowly at first, for the unfamiliar order of familiar words tripped up his tongue. Then he stammered, and suddenly stopped, for it occurred to him—in saying his prayers backwards, was he not doing a very wicked thing, for which the God who was watching his slightest movement, ready to pounce on him if he stumbled, would inflict some terrible punishment? What if God should kill the dear little calf he loved so! Or perhaps He would make James and Patrick send him to school, right away from the farm and the fields, just when the bluebells were so dense in Steephill Wood. The bare thought was agony. Yet, on the other hand, there was the morbid impulse, goading and hauling, and there, too, was a certain pleasurable anticipation of the days when he should be known throughout the district as "the little boy who had seen the devil." He hesitated, and nearly wept; then he muttered a few more words—then a great scream rang through the oast.

The doorway that had formerly let a ray of outdoor twilight on to the litter where he knelt was blocked by a tall black figure, featureless in the gloom. The boy started up, staggered, stared for a moment with rolling eyes, then

fell in a heap against the wall. It was the devil! The angry God had sent him, though the blasphemy was but half finished. Scream after scream sent the swallows flying from the cowl; scream after scream brought footsteps to his side, hands on his shoulders, and to his nostrils a mixed smell of stable and tobacco, which revealed the proximity of his brother James.

But he knew that it was not James he had seen in the doorway, and he clung to him in a palsy of terror as he looked up. Behind his brother stood a tall dark figure, but this time the light was on its face, showing human and not unpleasant features.

"Hullo, man!" the figure exclaimed. "What's all this about? I didn't mean to startle you. Come, come! you've got over it now."

But he had to deal with a nervous child, screwed up five seconds before to the highest pitch of effort and control—he scarcely knew of which he had been most afraid, God or the devil—and consequently running down like a piece of overwound machinery. Besides, the boy was bitterly ashamed, now that he saw the real nature of his Satan; he realized that he had been a fool as well as a blasphemer, and sobbed wretchedly at the discovery, rejecting with the stubbornness of utter shame all efforts at consolation.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether he would have recovered self-command within the next ten minutes had not James resorted to more familiar methods of persuasion. He found his head held firmly against his brother's side, and received three or four cuffs that sent the blood singing in his brain and made it as well that he had shut his eyes. He did not struggle or protest; indeed, the treatment brought him a vague comfort. James had come straight from the cow-stable, and his clothes and hands smelt of cows, so that, when his small brother panted against his coat, it was as if he hid his face in the warm, comforting flank of Hetty or Primrose.

Any humanitarian protests which the gentleman in black might have wished to make were silenced by the

culprit's prompt return to grace. He gulped down the heel-taps of his shame, and, appropriating his share of the mingled stream of chiding and apology which James poured forth, he followed it with a free, if rather involved, confession of his iniquities.

James shook his head, and lent him his handkerchief—a sure sign of forgiveness.

" I'd be ashamed of myself, I would, goin' on like that before strangers. The idea of takin' the gentleman for Satan, too ! Didn't the Reverend Dawson say only t'other Sunday that he's a spirit, same as the Almighty ? A spirit don't wear a great-coat. You can't have been listenin'. Poet says he's got three heads ? I reckon that poet had taken three glasses too much. Besides, the only book you can believe's the Bible. You see what comes of hidin' away when you know you're sure to be wanted. And what d'you mean by sayin' ' Our Father ' backwards—you, a clergyman's nephew ? Justabout shockin', I call it, and you well deserved a fright and a lickin' afterwards. And now just you pull yourself together. You're to go with Mr. Gilmour to Widow's, and carry one of the cheeses as he's been buyin' here. Oh, he'll manage it nicely, sir—Claudie has a sight more muscle than you'd think."

Claude did not look forward to a walk with the stranger —shame, he felt, would burn horribly during the course of it—but he made no demur : firstly, because he would have been slapped if he had, and, secondly, because, on a closer inspection outside the oast, he found himself curiously attracted by Mr. Gilmour's face. It was not exactly handsome, though the eyes were fine and intimate, and the hair thick on the forehead, but there was kindliness in its many lines, and humour lurked in the corners of the mouth.

A depressed little wretch, he followed his elders into the dairy, where, on his tear-stains being explained to his sister Dora, he had to submit to a repetition of James's scolding, in a minor key, before being laden with the lighter of the two cheeses the stranger had bought. Mr. Gilmour, it appeared, was the new tenant of Widow's Farm,

away by Brasses Wood, in Westfield parish, and had come over to Spell Land to inspect the pedigree bull-pups that the Shepherds were advertising for sale.

Spell Land stood at the entrance of the lane running from the Broad Oak road on the hill to Brook Lodge in the valley. Claude knew the Broad Oak road very well, for he was accustomed to staggering along it after dark, with goose-flesh and damp brows, to fetch his brothers' evening beer ; but, not being a man of many wanderings, he had seldom explored the southward lane, winding white into the mystery of Steephill Wood. He walked steadily, with drooping shoulders, now and then stealing a glance at his companion, who strode, chin in air, his eyes fixed on the early stars, faint and few in the high south-west.

" So your name's Claude ? "

The child started. He felt that his ordeal of reproaches was going to begin.

" Yes, sir," he answered meekly.

" And how old are you ? Ten ? "

The boy's eyes kindled at the mistake. He could not have behaved so babyishly, after all. A glow of self-respect warmed his heart, and with it came a sense of gratitude and affection for the man at his side who had taken him for ten.

" Nine, sir," he answered ; " and James is forty, and Patrick's thirty-eight. I don't k now how old Dora is. I wish I was a man ! "

" And what will you do when you're a man ? "

" I'll wear riding-breeches, and spit, and sleep alone, and send someone out at nights for my beer."

" But what will you do to earn your living ? "

" I reckon I'll help James and Patrick on the farm. I help a little now, but I don't get paid for it. Perhaps one day I'll have some land of my own."

" You're a very practical man. When I was your age I wanted to be a ship's cook, and a year later I was all for keeping a grocer's shop. Since then I've wanted—and sometimes tried—to be a postman, a cattle-driver, an

Arctic explorer—everything, in fact, but what I actually became."

"What was that?" ventured Claude.

"A minister."

The boy looked up at him in some surprise. In spite of his black clothes and semi-clerical hat and tie, he was not at all his idea of a minister.

"I've an uncle who's a clergyman," he said. "He's going to be curate here, because the Rev. Dawson's getting too old for work. But a clergyman ain't the same as a minister; a minister's chapel."

"I had charge of a chapel in America for five years. I belong to what is called the New Church."

"There's three chapels and one church in Easeham, but they ain't none of them new."

"I've nothing to do with the chapels here. I'm what most people call a Swedenborgian. Do you know what that is?"

Claude did not, but he expected James did. James knew everything about religion. He had been churchwarden for six years.

"Well, I think you ought to know something about Emanuel Swedenborg. He's the Grand Man of the eighteenth century. When we get to Widow's Farm I'll show you some of the books he wrote."

They had reached the bottom of the lane, where the twilight lay on the great pond by Fryman's Farm, and leaving the marle, they struck out across the meadows southward. Widow's Farm stood some fifty yards rom the road winding between Sedlescombe and Westfield. Mr. Gilmour did not farm it, the yard and barns being in the charge of his landlord; but he told Claude that he had taken the house on a long lease because it was beautiful.

Things were not often done for that reason at Spell Land, so the boy stared rather curiously at Widow's, expecting the marvellous. It was a long low building, the roof, of red tiles, crimping over the rafters, the upper story of white plaster, chequered with the moving shadows of

trees. It seemed to him old and tumble-down—not nearly so attractive as his own home, which had been built barely twelve years.

He was even less favourably impressed with the interior. He was told to carry his cheese into a room which at first sight he took for the kitchen, as the floor was uncarpeted, the wall covered with a pale-green wash instead of paper, and the furniture seemed to consist only of a table and a couple of wooden chairs. However, when he looked behind him, he saw a bookcase, and bookcases were "parlour furniture," according to his experience. He also missed the roaring kitchen grate, and the row of dish-covers that reflected the fire-light at home. This must be Mr. Gilmour's parlour, and a wave of pity for his new friend drove the last of shame out of Claude's heart when he thought of the antimacassars, tapestried sofa, and stuffed canaries of the parlour at Spell Land. However, the minister seemed quite satisfied. He had never seen the Spell Land parlour.

He pulled one of the chairs to the fire, and beckoned Claude to the other, but the boy's eye had fallen on a picture hanging above the fireplace. It was a strange picture, quite unlike anything he had ever seen. It represented an aged man kneeling on a cloud, his hair and beard blown by a mysterious wind, his arm extended at full length, setting a compass on the blackness of lower space. Claude was not sure whether he thought it pretty, and, not being coloured, it was certainly inferior to the beautiful picture called "Springtime," from Pears' *Christmas Annual*, which hung in the parlour at home. None the less, it fetched from him a half-surprised, half-admiring "Oh!"

"That's Blake's 'Ancient of Days.' It's the Beautiful Thing of this room. I make it a rule that every room in my house shall contain one—just one—beautiful thing. It's a trick I learned in America, though it came originally from Japan."

"And are all the other rooms as empty as this?"

"Quite," said the minister, smiling. "You see, my great idea is to have as little furniture as possible, so that

each object has its proper value. Most men cram their houses, with the result that the individual savour is lost. It's the same with books. What's the good of a library catalogue running into thousands when there are only about a hundred books in the world worth reading ? Those shelves over there are all the library I possess, but there's not a book on 'em that isn't worth reading fifty times over. I'm all for choice, you see, discrimination, selection ; this age is all for crowds, masses, lumps, the undigested——"

He became suddenly aware of his audience, staring agape.

" Yes, I dare say you think I'm talking nonsense, and it's cruel of me to bore you."

" I like to be talked to as if I was a man."

" Well, you are a man, aren't you ? " said Gilmour, pulling him on to his knee. " Dear me ! and a heavy man, too."

Claude hesitated ; he had a troublesome conscience. " I wasn't this evening—in the oast-house," he faltered.

" But you are now, and you won't do stupid things in the oast-house any more."

" It won't be any good doing them," said Claude dejectedly. " If James says he's a spirit, he can't appear."

He had been grateful for his brother's assurance in the time of terror, but now that the warm fire-light leaped on the beams, and strong arms held him, he threw a regretful glance at the three-headed monster of his nightmares.

" Christian saw him," he continued with a sigh ; " he was straddling across the way. But that must be all pretence, like the poets. The only book you can believe's the Bible "

To Gilmour little Shepherd's dejection was more pathetic than ludicrous. The eyes were like an animal's in their appealing ignorance. He felt that a perfectly legitimate craving to apprehend the hidden and spiritual lay at the bottom of the farce of the child's tragedy. Here was one to whom, above all, his Master spoke.

" It isn't quite the only book you can believe," he said.

" I have one or two here on my shelves which you can trust with your whole heart."

He rose, and taking Claude by the hand, led him to the bookcase, confronting him with a row of rather dingy calf-bound volumes.

" These are the great books of Emanuel Swedenborg. He is the man to whom heaven and hell were opened, that he might in his turn open them to the world. He knew that men were stumbling and trembling because of their ignorance, so he showed them all he had seen, that they might not stumble or tremble any more."

" James doesn't like chapel," said Claude ; " he says the Dissenters are getting too big for their boots."

" Well, I shan't try to corrupt you ; I ask no man to accept my doctrine. The Truth is so big, you see, that a man cannot hope to grasp it all, and if we each saw only the same little fragment, how much we should lose ! But I want you to read what Swedenborg wrote—thousands of people who have nothing to do with the New Church love his beautiful writings, and I want you to love them too. You're not quite old enough for most of them now, but if you like, I'll read to you a little before you go home. Are you fond of books ? "

" I like books about the devil."

" Well, Swedenborg wrote a great deal about the evil genii of the farthest hells, which are called ' the devil,' but as you're a young man of vivid imagination, we won't read of them to-night. We'll read something that will give you happy dreams."

He took Claude once more on his knee, and read to him, out of *Heaven and Hell*, the chapter on " Little children in Heaven." At first the boy occasionally interrupted him with questions, but after a while ceased. His head drooped wearily against Gilmour's shoulder, and when, at the end of the chapter, the minister looked down, he saw that he was sleeping.

David Gilmour laughed.

" The happy dreams have come earlier than I bargained

for—at least, I hope they're happy," as Claude's body twitched like a sleeping puppy's. "I wonder what sort of life the child leads. They don't look bad people, the Shepherds; but I should think he got more kicks than halfpence. All the better for him, I dare say. I mustn't lose sight of the little beggar, for I expect he'll have a fighting time of it—many battles before 'Israel shall be a third with Egypt and Assyria, whom Jehovah of Hosts shall bless."

CHAPTER II

THE HALL-MARK OF GENTILITY—THE DISADVANTAGE OF BEING WITHOUT A GOOD BODILY IMAGE—NOT LIKE A GIRL

IT was to Claude Shepherd's father that Spell Land owed its prosperity. The farm, situated on the borders of the Sussex parish of Easeham, was some four hundred acres in extent, partly pasture, partly arable and hop. John Shepherd had farmed it well, and just before his second marriage had pulled down the lath-and-plaster dwelling-house and built the ugly red-brick cottage that stands there to this day. It was abominably built, and the wind used always to howl in it, under the doors and ill-fitting window-frames, till it was a cavern of draught and moaning.

James, Patrick, and Dora were the children of his first wife, a farmer's daughter with a fortunate capacity for work. The second Mrs. Shepherd, a frail woman, close on middle age, died at the birth of her child. She had been of a better class than her predecessor, having held a clerkship in Hastings for some years before her marriage.

Shepherd himself stood a degree above his neighbours, his ancestors, sound yeomen of the old school, having once owned most of the land round Easeham. He also had a brother in Holy Orders, a source of mingled trouble and thanksgiving—thanksgiving because one's relationship to a clergyman lifted one out of the ruck of the lower middle class; trouble because the Reverend Charley Shepherd, being a married man, and having never enjoyed a stipend larger than a hundred pounds a year, was constantly straining his brother's Christianity by expecting from him

a literal observance of the commandment to lend freely, asking not again.

John Shepherd died only a year after his wife, and James and Patrick took upon themselves the management of the farm. They were both excellent farmers, James providing the caution necessary to an undertaking to which Patrick brought the essential salt of enterprise. Spell Land was a concern that paid its way, more than most of the neighbouring farms were able to do, and before Claude Shepherd was nine years old his elders had bought another hundred acres of pasture, nearly doubled their stock, and occasionally called themselves " gentlemen farmers " when dealing with town customers.

Their little half-brother had made only a poor fight for the first six years of his life, but of late he had become more robust, though, mentally, he was still an odd bundle of fears and whimsies, easier whipped than understood. James was not a little discomfited by his most recent mania ; it seemed to him a shocking thing that a clergyman's nephew, and that clergyman so soon to become curate of the parish, should be consumed with an intense personal admiration for the devil. He was not a little relieved, on the boy's return from Widow's Farm, to find that the infatuation was dead, and apparently as the result of his own wisdom.

James was supposed to " take after " his uncle. Throughout his life he had been a sturdy supporter of the Church of England as by law established, and proved one of the most devoted and conscientious churchwardens the parish had ever known. His small brother looked upon him as an oracle, omniscient and infallible where theology was concerned. A few words from him on that memorably disagreeable afternoon had been quite enough to convince the child that his hero and tormentor of weeks was nothing but a bodiless unreality, as unsubstantial and uninteresting as the guardian angels he had so often heard of but never seen

This conviction not only put an end to all hopes of seeing the Evil One face to ace, but also knocked a

powerful idol off its pedestal, and left the temple of the boy's hero-worship empty of a shrine. At first, when, the night after his disillusionment, terror came tumbling down the chimney to whip his little tired body out of its first sleep, it had been sweet to think that no three-headed bogy existed, and that the assaults of evil were one and all against his immaterial soul; but in the light of day, wandering about the farm without a playmate, imagination hankered for the painted image before which it had danced for so long.

He did not go to school, for James looked down on the "National," and intended to send the boy to the Grammar School when he was old enough. Meantime he was desultorily taught at home, and suffered for it in a lack of companions among the children of the neighbouring farms.

Sometimes his brother Patrick would play with him, but games with Patrick were seldom free from danger; bruises were their invariable accompaniment, and more than once they had ended in blood—though Claude thought the most grievous accidents amply compensated for by the sugar mice his brother always bought him as a peace-offering. The subtle worship of the weak and gentle for the strong and heartless also had a share in their relations. Sometimes when Patrick's swarthy cheek was close to his, and his warm breath on his neck, the child would feel a kind of bursting pride in him, and would run his hands through the black tousled curls, and even put his fingers in his mouth, though his bites were playful only in intention.

Of late Claude had been expecting a new playfellow, for his Uncle Charley was to bring with him to Easeham his stepson, Oliver Mills, who, rumour said, was just about little Shepherd's age. But disillusion had dulled the edge of anticipation. He had been looking forward to telling Oliver of his intercourse with the powers of darkness, and impressing him with his resource, daring, and general importance on that account, and now that he had been left a little cowardly nobody, he shrank from meeting the boy

who, he felt sure, would have heard of his impious and contemptible conduct.

James, however, in his triple capacity of churchwarden, nephew, and creditor, was duly impressed by the Reverend Charley's coming. All the neighbourhood knew that " the Shepherds had a parson in the family," for though James had never vulgarly boasted, he had never failed to lay a decent stress on such a hall-mark of gentility. But it was not given to every man so circumstanced to be able actually to produce his enviable relation, and James considered it directly due to Providence that " the Reverend Dawson " had at last been driven to realize himself too infirm for the entire charge of a scattered parish, and having advertised for a curate, had had but one remotely satisfactory answer to his advertisement.

To tell the truth, the post was not one to be coveted ; even the advertisement in the *Guardian* had been unable to mention any attraction beyond " Pict. count. sceny." It was a large parish, entirely agricultural, and totally destitute of " society " ; moreover, the few representatives of the upper middle class within its bounds wondered that the new curate should care to officiate in a church where his distinctly " impossible " relative, James Shepherd, was Rector's warden.

But the Reverend Charley had been three years in his present curacy, which meant that his creditors were making it desirable for him to remove himself as far as might be, and the opportunity of revived intercourse with a prosperous relation was too good to be missed. Besides, to the intense disgust of Miss Kingsley, his sister-in-law, who had lived with him ever since his wife's death, he showed absolutely no wish to forget his lowly boyhood, and seemed to feel positive pleasure at the thought of revisiting the farm where he had helped strip the fuggles and guide the ploughing-team.

He arrived in the June of '88, and the next day James Shepherd visited him in state. He returned unusually reticent. Oh yes, Uncle Charley looked very well, though

a bit greyer Miss Kingsley? He had found her rather haughty—quite the lady, in fact. Oliver Mills? James had not seen much of him, but he should say he was a fine little feller. And what did they think? Uncle Charley had adopted a girl, the orphan of a cousin of his wife's, who had died broke to the eternal. He had taken her in out of charity—he, who had just been obliged to borrow five pounds off his nephew.

Claude, though he had not listened with any particular eagerness to the first part of the news, was roused into disgust by this last piece of information. He had been looking forward languidly to Oliver Mills as a playmate, but there could be no happy anticipation now that his games were to be shared by a little girl. Claude hated little girls. In his opinion they were always snatching at the sweetest, and if they were denied, they cried, not the subdued tears one would expect from girls, but a hearty yell that brought the avenging mothers of the persecuted and the indignant brothers of the persecutor on the scene. They told tales, too, and had horrid secrets among themselves. Claude inwardly called his uncle's foundling a pig and a sneak, and heard with scant pleasure that he was to go to tea at the Church Cottage on the following afternoon.

Indeed, when the afternoon came, he hid himself in the Dutch barn, a piece of rebellion of which he had not often been guilty. But of late, though the active hankering was dead, he had missed the moral support of his idol, and a sudden tendency to fractiousness and disobedience had perplexed his elders, and testified to the disadvantage of being without a " good bodily image."

Unfortunately, the hiding-places of our childhood are rather like the subterfuges of later years. In good time Claude was hauled out of his, and ignominiously smacked. His sister Dora said she would have whipped him properly if there had been time. Claude felt vaguely penitent, but the discomfort of his best suit and the tightness of his Sunday boots throttled the more gracious spirit.

Dora fussed over him for a quarter of an hour, panting with anxiety. She was the victim of anæmia ; her breath was short, her face pale, and she never had any appetite, except for sweets and tea. Her complaint, however, did not seem to interfere with her capacity for work ; Claude did not remember ever having seen her rest, any more than he had ever seen her with her hair out of curling-pins. The novelettes, of which she read such scores, were propped up in front of her while she peeled potatoes, or on the mantelpiece while she stirred the pudding. Whenever she was not slaving for the household she was making her own clothes ; she particularly affected a certain colour, known in the trade as " dead pink," and Claude had never seen her without a blouse of that shade, either on her body or in preparation.

" Now, you'd better mind your manners," she said, with a final assault on his hair. " Remember, your uncle is gentry, and ull expect you to behave yourself. If I hear you haven't been just as good as good, I'll ask Patrick to give you a right-down sound licking."

Then she kissed him, because she was sorry for him in his tight boots.

It was a three-mile tramp to Easeham, and the tight boots were white with dust when at last they stood on the Church Cottage doorstep. Claude found himself trembling as well as panting, for he felt rather doubtful as to his powers of dragging himself estimably through the ordeal ahead of him, and though Dora's threats seldom passed into reality, there was always a chance of their fulfilment.

The opening of the door cut short his reflections. It was opened by a maidservant, but before he had had time to do more than stare at her cap-strings, a boy of about his own age flung himself in front of her.

" I say, are you Claude Shepherd ? Because if you are, you're beastly late."

Claude felt that it would not improve matters to say

that he was late because he had intended not to come at all, so he held his tongue.

" You ought to say you're sorry," said the boy sternly.

His hectoring tone drove away Claude's two good angels—natural courtesy and the fear of consequences.

" I ain't sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't much later. I'm sorry I ever came at all."

" Come, come ; you mustn't quarrel," said the maid. " Master Oliver, you didn't ought to have spoken like that."

" You just shut up, Lucy. It's none of your concern."

Matters were beginning to look serious, when a footstep was heard in the hall, and Charley Shepherd himself appeared, awing Claude straightway into silence and remorse.

" What, fighting already ? " he said. " You receive your visitors rather queerly, Olly."

" I can't help it," said Oliver ; " he's a rude beast."

The retort furious rushed to Claude's lips, but they were too fast sealed by apprehension to let it pass. Oliver seemed to relent a little.

" He didn't want to come," he muttered. " He ought to have his head smacked."

" Why should he want to come ? It's all the more your duty to see that he wants to come next time he's asked. Now, tea's ready, my lads, so bury the hatchet."

Oliver scowled furiously for a moment, then burst out laughing.

" What a silly you are to lose your hair like that ! " he cried ; and as Claude's repentance was built on too solid a rock of panic for immediate collapse, the hatchet was buried.

Mr. Shepherd led the way to the dining-room. Claude thought his uncle must be very old, as his hair was nearly white ; but, somehow, his face seemed to contradict his hair, as it was smooth and fresh-coloured, with big roving eyes that would have been like Patrick's if they had not squinted.

" Here's the young man ! " he cried cheerfully, and pushed Claude almost into the lap of a lady sitting at the tea-tray. The lady greeted him with, " Good afternoon, dear," but did not say " dear " as if she meant it. " Has he wiped his boots, Charley ? " she added the next minute.

" Oh, never mind his boots ! " cried the parson. " Sit down, my boy, and make a good tea "

Claude sat down, but was rather mystified as to how he should obey the last half of the command, for there seemed to him very little to eat. At home they always had cheese for tea, and pickles, and tinned " delicacies," and occasionally a piece of tart or cold pudding. How was he to satisfy his hunger with those thin slices of bread and butter, those unsubstantial-looking buns ? Surely there was not enough for four people—five, if the hated little girl made her appearance, doubtless with the appetite which experience taught him was common to little girls.

However, she was evidently not expected, as everyone sat down without her, and the next minute the problem was no longer what to eat, but how to eat it. Claude felt that Miss Kingsley's eye was upon him, and his behaviour the subject of her thoughts and the object of her contempt. He could not prevent an uneasy suspicion that more than one of her remarks was intended for his enlightenment. For instance, when she told Oliver that no well-bred boy ever lifted his cup with both hands, he realized that he was using both his in the passage perilous of his teacup to his mouth. She also delivered, without context : " It is bad manners to spread jam with the jam-spoon."

His uncle asked him a great many questions about Spell Land and his brothers, but Claude soon found that as many sloughs lay in the path of conversation as of appetite. He realized that he spoke very differently from Uncle Charley, Miss Kingsley, and Oliver. The most striking idioms of the Sussex dialect had long been swallowed up in the flood of spreading Cockney, but the old drawl and heavy accentuation of last syllables still

flourished round Easeham, and Claude even had trouble with his aitches. During the meal he scarcely opened his mouth, except to introduce, with infinite precaution, a carefully-cut cube of yellow bun.

"And what about the little girl upstairs?" said the parson suddenly. "Has she had her tea?"

"My good Charley, I had no idea that children in disgrace were allowed tea. She shall have some bread and water before she goes to sleep, but I really cannot think of anything else."

"Surely she's been punished enough, poor little woman—in bed this lovely afternoon!"

"My good Charley, pray leave her to me. I assure you I know best how to deal with her."

Mr. Shepherd winked meaningly at Oliver, and was silent. A few minutes later tea ended, to Claude's unspeakable relief.

Oliver seized his arm, and dragged him out into the garden.

"Come and see my guinea-pigs," he said; "they're rippers! Have you got any pets?"

"I've got a dormouse. James gave it to me. It has a cage, and a wheel, and it washes its face. . . ."

"Oh, dormice are rotten! I had one, but I got sick of it, so I gave it to Emily, and she took it to bed with her, and it died. I say, aren't these stunning guinea-pigs? I bought this one myself—she's Eliza—and Charley gave me the little one in the corner there for my birthday."

They quickly fraternized over the guinea-pigs, and Claude was feeling almost at his ease, when his companion suddenly exclaimed:

"I say, this is beastly rotten! Let's go and have a game at something. Can you play cricket?"

Yes; but he did not think he was much good at it.

"Oh, it'll be better than nothing, anyway. You don't know what a sickening afternoon this has been—not a soul to play with."

"Isn't there a little girl here?"

"Yes, of course; there's Emily. But she tore her frock this morning, climbing the cherry-tree, like the silly idiot she always is, and Aunt Ethel sent her to bed."

The evening was so delicious, with its dainties of wind and sunshine, that Claude felt sorry for Emily, in spite of his relief to be spared her company.

"How justabout horrid for her!"

"Horrid for me, you mean. She doesn't care a hang. She never does. Aunt Ethel gave her a frightful whipping the other day, and she never turned a hair."

"Is she very wicked?"

"Not particularly; but she's always getting into rows. She says that when she's really wicked she doesn't get into rows, and when she isn't, then she does. She's awfully queer. She never tells you why she does things. I say, will you bowl? Don't send me any beastly lobs."

They played single wicket for exactly ten minutes, when Oliver flung down his bat, exclaiming:

"I say, you can't bowl for nuts."

"I'm sending 'em down all right," muttered Claude, sweating and injured.

"Indeed you aren't! I had to go right out of my ground after those last three, and they all pitched just anyhow. You're a rotter at cricket!"

"I ain't. It's you who're——"

"Take care, or I'll smack your head."

"Then I'll smack yours."

He was quite prepared to carry out his threat, but Oliver's expression suddenly changed.

"I say, let's have a boxing-match. I saw some fellows box at Norwich last year. It would be sport, wouldn't it?"

"Right you are!" said Claude, clenching his fists. He rather wanted to give him a black eye.

"Let's take off our coats and do it properly. Oh, you idiot! You don't know how to make a fist—you've got your thumbs inside."

Fist or no fist, Claude would have punched him with it had not the church clock at that moment struck half-past five. The church reminded him of his uncle; his uncle reminded him of James; and James reminded him of the awful fate awaiting him if he punched a clergyman's stepson. The effect was instantaneous. He dropped his arm.

"Don't be an ass," said Oliver, "and let's do something sensible. I expect you'll have to be going home soon, you know. I say, let's go and see Emily."

"The one who's in bed?"

"Yes; I expect she's having a sickening time of it, and we could play something in her room. There's lots more games for three than for two."

He ran off towards the house, and Claude followed him, feeling that the depravity of the individual might atone for the disadvantages of the sex.

"It's quite safe," said Oliver, as they entered the hall. "Aunt Ethel's always out now, knocking about the parish—once, when we were at Grasmere, she walked slap into a man's kitchen when he was having his bath. Charley's in the study; but it doesn't matter if he hears us—he's game."

They went upstairs, and paused on the landing, for from behind a door close by came suppressed sobbing.

"That's Emily," said Oliver. "She's crying because she feels a beast. I say, stamp about a bit, will you? so's to let her hear we're coming and get her handkerchief away, and all that. She'd be simply sick if we caught her howling."

Claude stamped obediently. The sobbing ceased, and Oliver burst open the door.

The room was dark, for the blinds were down, though the sunset poured fierily through them. The red rays burned on the iron bedstead and on the face of the little girl who sat up in it. How ugly she was!—that was Claude's first impression. Her face was thin, the chin long and pointed, her skin was brown, and her black hair

had not the vestige of a curl. But he liked her eyes, with their long lashes and straight, dark brows, and the strange, undefinable look in them which he was never to understand.

"Hullo, Em!" said Oliver. "This is Claude Shepherd. I've brought him up to see you."

Emily held out a hot, brown hand.

"I'm so sorry you're in bed," muttered Claude, rather at a loss what to say.

"Thank you. So am I. But it can't be helped."

"You could have helped it," said Oliver brutally, "if you hadn't climbed that cherry-tree."

"That's right! Hit a man when he's down."

Her voice quivered, and the tears swam back into her eyes. Oliver flushed.

"Oh, well, don't let's talk about it any more. I'm here for a spree—and, look, Em!"

He thrust his hand into his pocket, and brought out a warm, crushed bun.

"I saved that for you from tea. Catch!"

"No, thank you."

"You'd better. You're to have only bread and water for supper—I know it for certain."

"So do I. She said I wasn't to have anything else, so I'm not going to eat cake on the sly."

"You are a rotter! I thought you'd be so pleased."

"I'm going to do things on the square, whatever happens. So eat the bun yourself, Oliver."

"Oh, very well, since you're so ungrateful. Look here, what shall we play?"

"Argonauts?" suggested Emily.

"Oh, rot! We played that yesterday. Let's choose something we haven't had for ages. What about the 'Walls of Jericho'?"

"Yes; break a lot of things, and get me into a worse row than ever. No, thanks! What sort of games do you play?" she added, turning to Claude.

"I used to play 'Pilgrim's Progress' a lot, but I ain't

played anything lately. Nothing's true, you know. The only book you can believe's the Bible."

"Charley wouldn't like us to play Bible. But it doesn't matter if games aren't true. 'Don Quixote' isn't true, yet he makes a lovely game."

"Let's play 'Don Quixote,'" cried Oliver.

"Right you are; only I mustn't get out of bed."

"Let's have the wooden horse bit; you can be the Duchess."

"Who'll be Quixote?"

"I will."

"Claude ought, as he's the visitor."

"Oh, rats! He wouldn't know what to do. He can be Sancho, and the Duke, too, if he likes."

Claude liked, so they fell a-playing.

Little Shepherd's games of "make-believe" had always been solitary. His occasional comrades of the farmyard and cottage garden, not being of a creative temperament, preferred stiff acts of ritual, such as "London Bridge" or "Mary Sits a-Weeping," though they would sometimes unbend to a mixture of mimicry and imagination called "getting married," which always left in Claude's mind an uneasy qualm, lest, through some accident, he should have been irrevocably tied to the pink-pinafored partner of an hour. But this evening he had mumming playmates, who entered into the joy of mummery as fully as he. Oh, the bliss of it all! His timidity, his anxious deference, were gone, and a loud voice, a loud laugh, and a ready fist bore witness that the boy in him enjoyed his own again.

"I say, you aren't a bit of a rotter at this kind of game," panted Oliver. "If you like, I'll swop with you for a bit. You can be the Don, and I'll take a turn at Sancho."

The fiery sunset had left the bed-rails, the walls, and then the ceiling. Still they played and laughed, heeding neither time nor sunset, till the house-door suddenly shut with a resounding crash.

"There's Aunt Ethel!" cried Oliver. "Crikey! it's past seven. We'll get in no end of a row if we're caught. Come along, Claude; we can hide in the spare room till the coast's clear."

He sprang to the door, and little Shepherd stumbled after him, red with guilt.

"Cowards!"

Emily's voice rang sharply, and Claude hesitated. Her breast was heaving, and the stare of her indignant eyes made him drop his own.

"If you think you've done a shady thing in coming here, why can't you brave it out, instead of hiding like a pair of sneaks?"

"Don't be a fool, Em!" exclaimed Oliver. "Do you think I'm going to stay and be jawed, either by you or Aunt Ethel?"

"Well, run away and hide, then."

"And you'll peach."

"You wouldn't say that if I could get out of bed and give you one in the eye," said the young lady.

"I'm not going to stay here, anyhow. I don't see why I shouldn't get out of a scrape, if I'm clever enough. Come along, Claude—she'll be up in a minute."

But Claude still hesitated, staring at Emily.

"No," he muttered; "I'm staying."

"Oh, you bally ass!" said Oliver. "But I suppose you're pretty safe, as you're a visitor."

"No safer than you are," said Emily grimly. "You know Aunt Ethel hardly ever jaws you."

"Well, there's no good gassing any more about it, for here she is."

Miss Kingsley came in hurriedly.

"Now, what are you two boys doing in here? Emily, don't you remember——"

"It's my fault, aunt," interrupted Oliver. "She didn't know she wasn't to see anyone. I did. It's my fault."

Claude was surprised to hear him speak so generously,

after his behaviour of a minute ago. But the next moment proved the truth of Emily's words. As soon as Miss Kingsley became convinced that Oliver was the culprit, her tone softened appreciably, and beyond a shake of the head, and allusions to a "troublesome boy," her wrath was over.

However, she was evidently by no means pleased to find Claude Shepherd still in the house.

"It must be near your supper-time," she said, and, ignoring his reply that he did not have supper till nine, pushed him towards Emily's outstretched hand.

"Good-bye," said Emily; then added: "You were a brick not to run away and hide."

The boy coloured, under the stress of a new elation, mingled with a new and inexplicable embarrassment.

"I—I—you're a brick, too," he faltered; "you're not a bit like a girl."

CHAPTER III

ANATHEMA—THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW—A FAIR EXCHANGE

A FEW days later, when the aftermath hay was being mown, Claude Shepherd had another invitation to tea, this time at Widow's Farm. To his disappointment, he was not allowed to accept it, for James, directly he heard of the new tenant's heresy, decided that, though for commercial reasons there could not be a boycott, there should be no fellowship. He looked out "Swedenborg" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*—of which he had some half-dozen tattered volumes, fortunately including the late "S's"—and finding that the teaching of the New Church did not agree with his own little stock of mixed doctrines, he solemnly swore it accursed.

Outside his home circle James was not considered a theologian, but he had a profound reverence for the Church which had the honour to be the Church of his fathers and the British nation. His dogmas were rather confused, as they were without exception second-hand and imperfectly understood—perhaps if the warden's creed could have been proclaimed from the housetops it would, in its unloveliness, fatalism, and Philistinism, have proved more grateful to the ear of Mr. Hughes, the Baptist minister, than to Mr. Dawson, the Rector of St. George's. None the less, James had the deepest contempt for Mr. Hughes, with whom he indiscriminately massed Mr. Polshaw of the Wesleyans, Mr. Dunning of the Primitive Methodists, and his new neighbour of Widow's—differing, maybe, in the

exact nature of their dissent, but all equally non-endowed and non-established.

David Gilmour was not surprised at the sudden coolness ; in a measure he could understand it. He had lived long enough to realize that every man makes God in his own image, and his acquaintanceship with James had prepared him for the decrees of James's God.

He remembered, too, his own start of horror and contempt when the lantern of Swedenborg's teaching first shone into his heart. He had been brought up for the priesthood of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, but while an undergraduate of Edinburgh University, certain things that could be shaken were removed, and Gilmour, not having yet laid hold of the kingdom which cannot be moved, found himself in a darkness where there was neither star nor altar. His parents, champions of the old orthodoxy, of the six days of Creation and Balaam's ass, shut their door on the apostate, with his Darwin and his Huxley and his Haeckel, his nebular hypothesis and Chaldean allegories. For some years he was a tramp in the Western Highlands and islands, a nomad also in the world of creeds, keeping his body alive by an inherited pittance, and his soul by the fragments that remained of the vanished bread of heaven. There was early grey in his hair when at last he met the apostle with the loaves and fishes. He was not fitted for materialism, rationalism, or agnosticism ; he was too rich a mystic, in spite of his stern practicalness, and a born worshipper, in spite of independence. But revealed faith, as he understood it, seemed to mock his intellect, and both will and understanding recoiled from a Deity who, having crowned His work with intellect, yet wished that intellect violated in His worship. "Now," said Swedenborg, "it is permitted to enter intellectually into the mysteries of faith." That, and the doctrine of the *Divinum Humanum*, won him. He found a worthy conception of God—no man-God, but God-man. At first there was reluctance, contempt, suspicion, kicking against the pricks ; but he was in the power of necessity

and reaction, the twin forces of man's life, and suddenly he found himself thrusting out his hand and grasping his treasure. In his first eagerness he embraced the whole doctrine of the New Church—Degrees, Correspondences, the Judgment of 1757, and the denial of the material resurrection and of the Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity —and though at first there was no outward separation from the Church to which he had returned in the early flush of faith, in course of time he grew impatient of the Athanasian pulpit, and united himself openly with the disciples of the one God-man. A short while later he left Scotland for America, where the Master's teaching had a firmer hold, and for five years he ministered to a large and enthusiastic New Church congregation at Baltimore.

A severe attack of typhoid fever, of which he nearly died, forced him to give up his charge, and a few months later he came to England, strangely reticent concerning his beliefs. The truth was that reaction was again setting in, and the mind was losing its indiscriminate clutch. The Swedenborgian conception of God and philosophy of Providence still remained, but there was no longer the sick intolerance of Athanasian and Pauline theology. At Easeham he found himself—rather to his surprise—scarcely missing the New Church worship that had formerly been his life. On the rare occasions he joined in public service he was content to sit with those who had perhaps never heard of the Sage, his master, who adored the three Gods of Athanasius, and looked forward to the Last Judgment of Paul.

James Shepherd was at first rather taken aback at the sight of the Swedenborgian minister kneeling in the parish church, and was still more overwhelmed by the ten-shilling piece he afterwards found in the offertory bag. He and his fellow-warden, Ticehurst of Tanhouse farm, bracketed the two events together, as it was soon seen that they never happened except simultaneously. The death of Gilmour's parents had put him in tolerably easy circumstances, and in addition to his phenomenal generosity at Church

collections, his name appeared on most of the parish subscription-lists that Christmas. In course of time James began to modify his contempt, especially when he realized that though the minister seldom came to church oftener than once in three months, he never under any circumstances went to a chapel.

"He can't be a rank Dissenter, or he'd go to the Baptists or some o' that fry, as his own particular sort of chapel ain't here"—and in January he allowed Claude to accept a second invitation to tea at Widow's Farm.

The boy did not receive the permission with the delight he would have shown in August, for a crowd of new hopes and interests had jostled the old desires out of his life. He had to a great extent lost his morbid nervousness, and his imagination, rescued from the tombs, ran healthily and happily along a highway of romance, by the side of two new-found playfellows.

There had been an exchange of hospitalities, and a week or so after Claude's first visit to the Church Cottage, Oliver Mills and Emily Branwell appeared at Spell Land Farm. Claude had hitherto always pictured Emily in her nightgown, and felt rather shy of the damsel in the short holland frock and long black stockings, with a mane of dark hair held out of her eyes by a circular comb.

She was very quiet, he thought, but Oliver's unceasing chatter made up for her want of speech. The resources of the farm were severely taxed to provide him with entertainment, and James, Patrick, and Claude were soon panting with their efforts to find him a pastime he would not dismiss at the end of five minutes with, "I say, this is beastly rot!"

Still, the afternoon was undoubtedly a success, for Claude now found himself with a couple of playmates anxious for the continuation and confirmation of friendship. James was highly pleased at the frequent visits his little brother paid to the Church Cottage; Emily and Oliver were unmistakably "gentry," even a grade above Uncle Charley, who owed his gentility merely to his brains.

" Yes, Claudie's out this afternoon—at tea with his uncle —unaccountably friendly with the youngsters," he would say at chance meetings, and feel himself of worthier caste.

Claude visited Easeham far oftener than Oliver and Emily came to Spell Land, for Miss Kingsley soon found that the Shepherds ate with their knives, spat freely, and otherwise showed themselves doubtful examples. She would have forbidden the intercourse altogether if it had been possible. She had been disgusted enough at her sister's marriage to the parson of doubtful origin, but her affection for Charley Shepherd had overcome her disgust, and ever since Molly's death she had worked loyally for him and Molly's child. The curate himself left little to be desired in the way of good breeding. His speech, when addressing his superiors, occasionally showed the carefulness of a man afraid of dropping into vulgarisms—" commence " instead of " begin," " sufficient " for " enough," " place " for " put "—but his sister-in-law had come from force of habit scarcely to notice this. His relations, however, were quite another matter, and she decided miserably that it was impossible for anyone in Easeham parish to take her dear Molly's husband for a gentleman when his kinship with Spell Land was being constantly proclaimed.

She had done her best to oppose his coming to Easeham, but necessity and his inclination had overpowered her opposition. He seemed glad to be back in the old haunts, and was soon on the best of terms with his kinsmen. He would rest from the pettifogging stress of Sunday-school in the harness-room at Spell Land, smoking his briar beside James's and Patrick's cigars—the badge of the yeoman farmer, as distinct from the pipe of the tenant and the cigarette of the small holder—and insensibly his tongue slipped into the old warm drawl, the " justabouts," " unaccountables," and " surelyes." He was only a few years older than his nephews, and he seemed to grow young in their society. He was certainly in better health than

when he had first come to Easeham, and he worked indefatigably—suspected a little by the well-to-do, from whom he occasionally tried to borrow, loved much by the very poor, to whom he was always willing to lend.

Miss Kingsley at first struggled to keep her nephew from following his stepfather's footsteps into plebeian society, but Oliver demanded a playmate, and Oliver was one of the loose joints in Miss Kingsley's harness. It could not be expected that he should content himself with Emily, who, moreover, occasionally showed herself a perverse, ungracious child ; and as there were no children at Conster Manor, the only house in the neighbourhood that came up to Miss Kingsley's standard of gentility, it was just as well that he should have taken a fancy to little Shepherd, who, though he spoke with a distressingly vulgar accent, was on the whole a presentable child.

During the week Oliver went to a preparatory school at Hastings, but he was driven home in the carrier's cart every Friday afternoon, and Claude was invariably in attendance on Saturday. Rumour said that Oliver had as many " rows " at school as the luckless Emily at the Church Cottage ; at all events, he did not like his school, and was to leave it at the end of the term.

Sometimes Claude went to Easeham during the week. This was generally at his uncle's invitation. He thought that Emily was dull, and needed a playfellow as much as her cousin. But when Emily and Claude were alone together they often did not play, but sat on the shrubbery wall or in the lower branches of the plum-tree, and had very long talks on very odd subjects. Claude never felt quite at his ease with Emily, though on the whole he liked her as much as Oliver ; she called him a beast on the slightest provocation, and in spite of their intimacy there was always a disturbing sensation at the back of his heart that he did not know her at all.

What with visits to the Church Cottage, talks in the plum-tree, and romps on the lawn, Claude had come almost

to forget the friend of his friendless days. He pulled off his cap to Mr. Gilmour when he met him in the lanes, but he gave him no place in the world of youth and make-believe. Indeed, he received his second invitation to Widow's Farm in much the same spirit as his first to the Church Cottage. James wished it to be accepted for diplomatic reasons, and Claude dared not disobey; none the less, he arrived at Widow's a scowling protestant.

He came back not quite sure whether he had enjoyed himself or not. The Reverend Gilmour had shown him some queer pictures, rather ugly, by the man who had painted the "Ancient of Days" and had been the same kind of Dissenter as Mr. Gilmour. He had also shown him some Japanese pictures, which had made him laugh. One was called the "Thousand Carp," and was justabout ugly —all fishes.

He did not tell more, for his impressions were vague, though half sweet. That night, in bed, watching the stars through the high sash-window, he remembered what Mr. Gilmour had told him about the inhabitants of other worlds—how the dwellers in Mercury loved knowledge, and those in Jupiter simplicity and a good life; how this our earth was the weakest and wickedest of all the worlds. He had also spoken of many other things, delectable and mysterious. "Oh no, not religion," Claude assured James; "they didn't sound at all like religion, though they were all about God."

Mr. Gilmour had lent him two books—*Robinson Crusoe* and the *Last of the Mohicans*—having discovered that, since the abandonment of Milton and Bunyan, Claude's reading, such as it was, had been pretty equally divided between James's Sunday-school rewards and the penny dreadfuls that fed Patrick's intellect whenever he thought it worth while to open a book. The minister, attracted in the first instance by the child's loneliness and panic, found his affection, on the collapse of these, sustained by hopes and qualms for his future. He was glad of his friendship with the children at the Church Cottage, and gave it an

encouragement that was in reality little needed. He found the curate inclined to be sociable, though he was zealously scouted by the "Reverend Dawson," and once or twice he invited all three children to Widow's Farm. He had to pay the penalty. One evening Charley Shepherd appeared, suggesting that the minister should accept a little bill of his. He made the request unblushingly, and received the refusal with perfect good-humour.

"It's rather sickening," he groaned. "I'm in no end of a fix for a hundred-and-twenty, and James and Pat, though they've been good fellows in the main, won't touch this paper with a pitchfork."

"Well, you can't expect farmers to take more risks than circumstances oblige them."

"They must make a good deal out of Spell Land. In John's time it was more than paying its way, and they've done a lot since then."

"If it's a bigger business, it only means that expenses are bigger, too. I've had some experience of farming, and I doubt if they're making a penny more than when they first took it over. Besides, there's that boy of theirs to be educated. James was talking to me about him only the other day. They don't want to send him to a boarding-school, as they find him so useful on the farm, and they don't like the idea of the National. I hope to goodness they'll do something soon, for he's a shocking little ignoramus. Ten years old, and can barely do more than read and write."

"James is too proud for the National, though he was taught there himself. I wonder if——" He stopped suddenly.

"Well?"

"Nothing; only an idea that came into my head."

A few minutes later he took himself off, and called at Spell Land on the way home. For an hour the curate lounged in the stable, talking to his nephews as they smoked. At moonrise he strode his remaining three miles in a state of hilarious satisfaction.

It had been decided that Claude Shepherd should come daily for lessons at the Church Cottage, and have all the social and intellectual advantages of instruction from a University man and an M.A., in exchange for " Accepted, James Shepherd," across a little bill.

CHAPTER IV

PROMOTION—THE BETTER LIFE OF THE FIELDS—"LAVENGRO"—THE KISS

CLAUDE scarcely knew whether he was glad or sorry when told of the new plan. Of late he had been half hoping that he would be sent to school. In the penny books that Patrick read school was a very different place from what he had imagined. Ushers proved to be detectives in disguise; monitors were the cat's-paws of cracksmen; hidden treasure was found under dormitory beds, and occasionally a corpse in the boot-cupboard. Of course, "the only book you can believe's the Bible," but surely these amazing adventures must have some foundation of fact.

However, when he fully realized all that was involved in the new scheme, he felt almost glad that school-days had been postponed. He was to be at the Church Cottage every morning at nine, and was to go home to dinner at twelve. In the afternoon lessons would last from three to five, and it was possible that sometimes he might be asked to stay to tea.

On the whole, it was not a bad idea, and he set out in high spirits, one morning early in May, for his first day's work at Easeham. He was childishly eager for schoolmates at his lessons; on the other hand, he was unchildlike enough to look forward to the lessons themselves. Of late months his mental training had been spasmodic in the extreme. He could read perfectly, so his tasks with Dora were confined to the copy he wrote at the table at the other end of which was her ironing-board or her pudding-

basin. James taught him history and geography when he could spare the time, and Patrick swore over his sums once or twice a week.

" Now, Claude, do loop your *l's*. I've told you that so many times, you naughty boy ! " poor Dora would whine, in the intervals of her cooking. " Now, little lad, you just listen to me. That man Thomas à Becket wanted the Pope to—I mean, the Pope wanted him to—let me see, let me see—clergy to be tried in ecclesiastical courts—lay courts—um—um—um—— You ain't listenin', boy. Can't understand ? Nonsense ! " Thus James taught history, while " Damn the blasted thing ! The devil's in it ! " was generally the epitome of Patrick's instructions.

But more delicious far than the thought of lessons with Uncle Charley, even of yoke-fellows at the desk, was the prospect of playtime comradeship, no longer once or twice a week, but every day. Oliver had left school—rumour said that his stepfather had been asked to remove him—and the first experiment having been so disastrous, it was decided not to repeat it for a while. Claude looked upon him and Emily almost as a brother and sister, though they had their moments of alienation. With Oliver these invariably took the form of a few hot words, a few hard blows, and a reconciliation ; with Emily they were more subtle in cause, more bitter in effect, and the reconciliation came only with dim eyes and awkward flushing.

Miss Kingsley's heart sank at the prospect of little Shepherd's dirty boots kicking daily at her table-leg, but experience had schooled her not to oppose Charley, who, in spite of his easy good-nature, had a stolid will, and some vestiges of the temper of the days when he had cuffed the farm-lads on his brother's acres. Besides, the diplomacy of the scheme was undeniable. Most of the muddle of her brother-in-law's finances rested on her back. She had to make his ridiculous stipend cover his expenditure—a coat by no means cut according to his cloth—and sacrificed her own small income ungrudgingly in his service. Those who, before her sister's marriage, had looked upon her as a drab

curmudgeon, marvelled to see her willing to spend and be spent in the service of this brother of low degree. Some gaped uncharitably, others realized that where her unready love was bestowed she also bestowed herself, and dearer than herself.

She sometimes wished that there could have been a more discriminate oblation, that no unloved mouth should eat of the sacrifice. She looked upon Emily Branwell's adoption as a piece of charitable swashbuckling, dismally characteristic of her brother-in-law, who played equally fast and loose with give as with take. Moreover, Emily's father had not behaved cousinly to her or to her sister, and she thought it very tactless of Charley to have ignored the feud in his game of Good Samaritan. Emily herself was a gruff, mysterious little creature, not calculated to overthrow initial prejudice. Miss Kingsley felt unable to like her, and one of the grudges she bore against Claude Shepherd was that he occasionally showed signs of preferring little Branwell to her cousin.

Claude noticed her coldness, and once or twice complained of it at Spell Land. But his elders were unsympathetic. They scarcely ever saw Miss Kingsley, so she could not chill them, and they were secretly delighted at their small brother's promotion. They did not entirely approve of Uncle Charley, but the weight he gave to their name in the parish was undeniable. He was much the same as an heraldic crest—he involved expenditure, but gave distinction and patrician flavour.

Claude was rather disappointed with his lessons at first ; he found them hard and dull. James had told him that his uncle was astonishingly clever, a man of laurels, so the boy expected much. Unfortunately, Uncle Charley had no gift for teaching. His attainments were either blotted out in a fog of obscurity or drowned in a wallow of minor inaccuracies. " Charley says the Battle of the Standard was in 1134," gloated Oliver, only the second morning, " and it isn't—it's 1138. I looked it out in Ransome, and saw for myself."

There were many other such mistakes, but after a time even a boy's roving eyes were compelled to see the sterling metal under the dross; for Nature had given Charley Shepherd one rare gift—enthusiasm. To him knowledge was no commonplace inheritance: it had been long fought for and hard won; it had raised him from the masses to the classes, from the plough to the pulpit, given him the thrill of pursuit and the joy of attainment. To his enthusiasm, perhaps, he owed his obscurity, as a certain amount of detachment is necessary to clear instruction; but detachment is emasculate, whereas enthusiasm is bound sooner or later to beget its kind. After all, it could not matter much that lessons were obscurely given, if one went home from them aching for further knowledge, tearing down forgotten textbooks from dusty shelves, working out one's stock of information in countless propositions on countless scraps of paper. On the whole, Claude had cause to be thankful that knowledge did not come to him predigested, in tabloid form, as he would doubtless have swallowed it at school, but tough and raw, requiring thorough mastication before it could be turned to account.

He and Emily used to prepare their lessons together in the evenings, out of doors when the light lived long. Oliver occasionally joined them, but as a rule he preferred the more substantial help of his aunt. He lacked his comrade's industry. He was fond of asking questions, contradicting mathematical facts, and catching his step-father tripping; but he considered "prep." a burden to be exchanged as soon as possible for his cricket-bat, his guinea-pig, or his sketch-book—drawing, with occasional attempts at water-colours, being the only sedentary occupation he could tolerate.

Claude missed him at first, but he soon came to see how comfortable it was for two on the plum-tree bough, and that three would mean dangerous crowding. One day, when their lessons were finished, he pulled out of his pocket a book with a flaring paper cover, on which a youth in

moccasins and sombrero was leaping a steed of doubtful anatomy over a cliff, while a score of redskins fired at him from the neighbouring rocks.

" Would you like me to read this to you, Em ? " he asked, looking shyly under her hat. " It's justabout ripping ! " One result of the new companionship was that he was beginning to mix his Sussex colloquialisms with Oliver's more bloodthirsty, though, he was given to understand, more high-class English.

" What's it about ? "

The cover seemed to please her, and soon they were both enthralled by the printed page. There was a great deal that they could not understand, for this was not the more innocent kind of penny dreadful, but the rough, adventurous atmosphere, the crime, the violence, the horror of it all, cried to their young blood. When they had reached the last page, Claude said :

" I'll bring another some day soon. Em, don't you think it 'ud be middling sport if you and I read a bit together every day after lessons ? "

" I think it would be ripping."

" Then let's do it—just you and I."

" What about Oliver ? "

" You don't want him, do you ? "

" Why, of course I do. Besides, he'd hate to be left out in the cold."

Claude's face fell, and a strange burning pain shot into his heart.

" He'll soon get tired of it," he mumbled.

' Yes, I dare say he will. But it would be mean not to ask him, all the same."

Claude said nothing. The pain was hotter than ever in his heart. For the first time in his life he was jealous.

In the May of '90 the elder Shepherds decided that Claude should do a definite amount of farm-work every day. This seemed hard to him, for he was generally pretty tired of an evening, and when one's boots are white after

a tramp through hot dust, and one's head is aching after a desperate struggle with compound fractions, three hours' hard work comes much amiss. But he had never been suffered to rebel, and in this case was promptly sent about his business. At first he took it bitterly, for the readings in the plum-tree must now end, also the voluntary studies of recreation hours. He had to work during the midday interval, and when he was released from his tasks at night he was generally too tired to do more than tumble into bed.

But after a time he came to see the bright side of his fate. He grew to love the dumb beasts, with their dumb loves and sorrows. He ceased to covet Oliver's guinea-pigs, for all the farm-stock were now his companions in labour and rest. The two farm dogs, Nimrod and Stranger, became his friends—they were no fawning lap-dogs, no ladies' pets, but they were faithful servants and good workers, as he was learning to be.

At that time he led a double life—the rough-and-ready life of Spell Land, the gentler life of his uncle's household. At Spell Land the general atmosphere was coarse, though the farm had certain ideas of decorum that would have been laughed at as prudish in most town drawing-rooms. Patrick, in his younger days, had been exceedingly dissolute, and though he had by this time sown his wild oats, and kept steady enough, his temper was violent and uncertain, and his language occasionally obscene. Even the unsqueamish James and Dora would now and then rebuke him with a " Don't be coarse, Pat," but he never stirred in them either disgust or uneasiness, because they had always judged him by a different standard from other men ; he was blamed for his misdeeds as dogs and horses are blamed, as one only in part responsible for them. Claude naturally aped his elders, and various " rows " at the Church Cottage were due to his occasional outspokenness on delicate subjects and damning of refractory lessons. Charley Shepherd could understand and sympathize, but Miss Kingsley grieved as she hought of Oliver.

David Gilmour of Widow's in a measure contributed to both sides of Claude's life. He never winced at his bold handling of realities, for he saw the boyish purity beneath, but at the same time his own behaviour preached the advantages of grace and courteous dealing. He made a bold effort to develop the lad's artistic taste, but Claude never had a more enthusiastic adjective than " odd " for Blake's wonders. In the matter of books he was a brighter scholar ; he gulped down *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Last of the Mohicans*, and asked for more. He was given Lever, Marryat, and Michael Scott, and time saw him promoted to George Eliot and Dickens. Gilmour was pleased to find him spend the shillings his brothers occasionally gave him on cheap editions of the best-known classics, and though he showed an ill-matching taste for penny fiction of the sanguinary type—as distinct from the cleaner, more misleading kind beloved of Dora—the minister did not view this with the horror Miss Kingsley would have felt had she realized the nature of the books read in the plum-tree. Indeed, to a certain extent it reassured him, as it showed that through all the vagaries of Claude's imagination ran a strong undercurrent of the normal.

He was also glad to find in the boy a faculty that required no training of his—a growing love for the beauty at his doors, for the treasure that paved his daily path and needed no seeking in heaven or hell. As a small child he had seldom noticed the goodliness of his world, except for an occasional worship of the clouds he watched from bed ; but as he grew into his teens, the love and the perception grew, till they reached something of an artist's delicacy, and his eyes were no longer open only to Nature's palette-knife effects, but to some of her subtler studies—the sudden rush of wind through sunset-gilt firs, the moon in a larch-ringed pond, or stars in a farmstead well.

He grew to see the fitness of the name borne by the acres where he worked. He loved to think that the builder of the old house that his father had pulled down, of the old cottages and old barns he had left standing, had had this

thought in his heart when he gave the land its name. There was, indeed, a brooding spell in that quiet country. From his window he watched magical sunrises, at his labour he saw the noonday mist cast a shimmering veil round house and steading; sunsets stole faintly or strode fierily over the barn-roofs at roosting-tide. At night, from his bed, he could see the stars flashing on the ageless threshing-floor, from which the gale had winnowed the last chaff of storm. Dawes, the shepherd, had taught him the names of the various constellations one night when he crouched beside him in the wet field, and watched the sheep move like ghosts through mist and moonlight. That star above the oast-house was Altair, and those over the pond were the Pleiades, and that strange harrow that hung behind the poplar-tree was Charles's Wain. He had been promoted to the dignity of sleeping alone, and it was sweet to slip from bed unchallenged, send the high window creaking up, and stand there in the night wind, drinking in the pungent scents of night, watching the poplar toss its image across the pond, while, perhaps, the distant trotting of a horse beat time to the nocturne of beautiful silence.

It was fitting that in those days, when he had begun to live the better life of the fields, he should make friends with the prophet of the open air, George Borrow. He was fourteen when he first read *Lavengro*. Mr. Gilmour had watched his growing love, and one day judged the times ripe, and reached down the thumbed green volume from his shelves. Claude, as usual, read it with Emily. He and she had leaned their heads together over many a book in the plum-tree. The day's work was long, but occasionally would come a free Saturday afternoon, and a sprint through the mud or the dust to Easeham, a digging of toes into the gnarled bark—no hand to Emily: she disdained it—and then the eager turning of the page, and the quick breath of boy and girl. Oliver had been with them at first, but he soon pronounced their happiness "rot," and left them. Emily had seemed disappointed, Claude thought, and the

old burning pain was once more in his heart when she said that she sometimes went into her cousin's room, after he was in bed, and sat on his pillow, and told him all the blood-curdling adventures she had read of in the plum-tree.

Emily liked *Lavengro* as much as Claude. The first chapters struck them as unusual—nothing more—but when the gipsies came on the stage, interest quickened into fascination.

"I never met people like this in a book before," said Emily, as they read of the author who touched for the evil chance.

"But the queer part is that I so often feel that way myself," said Claude, "though I scarcely knew it till now."

"I'd love to go on the roads," said Emily again, when Lavengro drove off in Jack Slingsby's cart.

"I'm going to learn the road-language, anyhow," said Claude. "This man wrote a gipsy dictionary, and Mr. Gilmour's got it—I saw it in his bookcase."

The minister began to think that perhaps the literary sense had been roused at last, when, after the *Romano Lavo Lil*, Claude begged for the *Bible in Spain*, and later for *Wild Wales*. To a certain extent he was right, yet the boy and girl had been attracted by the spirit of Lavengro rather than his literary excellence, and an attempt to read Thackeray nearly drove them back to the brigands, blood, and broncho-busters. But the love of delicate language, subtle effects, and the vigour of restraint, had been stirred in them. Harry Hardhead of Silver Creek struck their growing taste as crude, and occasionally "rather horrid," and the doings of Jones Minor and Magsman Bill smacked for the first time of impossibility. They returned to *Lavengro*. It was against their principles to read a book twice, for they had grand ideas of reading every book in the English language. But, as Emily explained, *Lavengro* was like no other book that they had read, and an exception might well be made. Besides, it was April.

The second reading was even a greater inspiration than the first, and this time inspiration became concrete. Into Claude's mind shot a dazzling idea, a wonderful plan, mad and dangerous, but infinitely alluring.

"Emily," he said one day, when she swung her black legs against his serge trousers in the plum-tree, "would you like to go camping, like George Borrow and Belle Berners in the dingle?"

"Of course I should. But what's the good of asking?"

"Well, I was thinking that if you're game——"

"Of course I'm game; but it's absolutely impossible."

"It ain't, really. I was thinking about it in bed last night. There's a hollow exactly like Mumpers' Dingle in the Ram Field by Doucegrove Farm. We could camp there for a week without being found, and we could leave letters saying we were quite safe, and all that."

"We should both be thrashed."

"I shouldn't mind that if I could have a week's camping first. Just think how splendid it 'ud be! I could easily run up a couple of tents, and we could bring some rugs and some of the kitchen tea-things, and I've quite enough money to keep us in food for a week."

"Do you think it would be straight?" said Emily, looking him in the eyes.

"Of course it would. We'd tell no lies, and we'd brave it out afterwards. If we spoiled anything, we'd pay for it."

"Oh, I should like to come."

Her hands were clasped between her knees, and she looked over the orchard-boughs to the hazy fields by Raisins Farm. Her hair had fallen into her eyes, and she took out her comb, to fasten it back more securely. Before she thrust the comb into its place, she shook the hair from her forehead, and the sunshine filtering through the fruit-blossom burnished the thick, uncurled mane.

"Emily," said Claude, half surprised, "what beautiful hair you have!"

"Have I? I've never thought about it, so I can't tell you if you're right or wrong."

"It's justabout lovely," he murmured, and then, as her inscrutable eyes looked into his, a great impulse seized him, and, for the first time, he kissed Emily Branwell.

CHAPTER V

TENTS AND TEA—A SONG IN THE NIGHT—TOO GENTLY DEALT WITH—EMILY WILL NOT CRY

THE next week was breathless and deceitful. Emily and Claude both felt extraordinarily daring, and, as their plans were made in secrecy—with clandestine meetings, smuggled notes, and kicks under the table—extraordinarily guilty. Still, they did not flinch, though they knew that for both of them the consequences would be pretty severe. Claude made an inventory of their requirements—two dust-sheets and half a dozen hop-poles for the tents, a couple of rugs, a saucepan, a kettle, cups, plates, a pound of tea—where would be Belle Berners without tea?—six-pennyworth of bread, and last, and least romantic, a tin of sardines.

The evening before the eventful day he formally inspected the hollow at Doucegrove. It bore a fascinating likeness to Mumpers' Dingle. True, there was no path winding into its depths, and he sorely missed the muddy pool with the "frogs and eftes," but there was the fringe of sallows round the rim, and also the "spring of pellucid water," a land-spring, or, as they are called in Sussex, a lavant.

He had dragged six hop-poles from a pile awaiting erection in Loneham hop-garden. He felt rather guilty over this, but he knew that the poles were not to be set up till the following Thursday, by which time, doubtless, his bliss would be ended. He fastened them together in threes, like a gipsy pot-hanger, and nailed the dust-sheets

over them ; they made small but not inconvenient tents. Emily had hidden a few tea-things and their kitchen utensils among the ferns and wood-sedge. He took them out and put them in the tents. Then he surveyed the little encampment. It was worth a beating.

The next day was cloudless, and misty with the first heats of spring. Claude's legs shook a little as he walked to Easeham, for his walk back would take him no farther than the hollow lane, or rue, that leads from Broad Oak to Doucegrove, and Emily would be with him.

He found lessons tedious that day. Oliver was in a perverse mood, and spent half an hour in wrangling over Euclid's definition of a straight line. Claude thought that Emily looked at her cousin regretfully—it would be maddening to believe that she wished for his company at Doucegrove. The inattention of the pupils resulted in the irritation of the teacher, and it was his threats of imposition and detention that brought Claude and Emily to their senses. At last they were dismissed. Emily was to have a music-lesson, so Claude set out towards home, having appointed a tryst in the Pond Meadow, just before the throws.

He lay in the long grass, with hammering pulses, watching the spurge and bennet wave against the sky, listening to the creep of the meadow creatures round him. He must have slept—that strange sleep which is sometimes the comrade of intense excitement—for he never heard Emily's footsteps in the lane, nor the swish of her skirts through the grass as she came to him. He opened his eyes and looked up suddenly into her face, framed in the thick dark hair that drooped over her shoulders.

" Hurry up," she said laconically.

" Did you get off all right ? " he asked, as he stumbled to his feet.

" Quite all right. They won't find out I've gone till we're nearly at the dingle."

" James and Patrick 'ull be wondering where on earth

I am. I should be grooming Brandy and Soda now. Lord, won't Pat swear ! "

" We'd better go by the fields," said Emily, as he turned towards the gate. " Someone might see us on the road."

They skirted the hedge, and then struggled through it into a beanfield, fighting their way cross-country to Broad Land on the high road, then sweeping a circle by Doucegrove and the River Tillingham, and entering the dingle from the north. They at once set to work to arrange their camp on true Borrovian lines, eating as they did so a dinner of dry bread. Emily was inclined to scoff at an addition Claude had made to their stock at the last moment—a fowling-piece, with powder and shot.

" It 'ud be useful if real mumpers came along," he explained ; " we don't want anyone else camping here."

" And we don't want to be had up for shooting people either," said Emily. " And as the gun isn't yours, it only means that you'll get an extra belting for having taken it."

" I wish you wouldn't talk of such things. We've a whole week before it's time to think of being belted. Come, let's go and explore."

The dingle was about half a mile from the road, in the corner of a field by Winter Wood. Not a house or a shed was in sight, but from the next field, which lay higher, they could see the oasts of Doucegrove Farm, rising out of a froth of cherry-blossom.

When they had surveyed their kingdom, they went back into the hollow and made a fire. There was plenty of wood for this purpose, but, unfortunately, most of it was too damp to burn easily. Being the brother of a landlord of hursts, Claude knew what a crime it is to break and burn growing bushes. However, the dingle was in a neglected state, and a dead hazel stood not far from the tents ; helped by a few twigs of this, they managed to coax a

light from their unpromising fuel. The boy fetched some water from the lavant, and they crouched down to watch their kettle boil.

Claude was at this time just beginning to notice Emily Branwell's face and figure. When he had first seen her he had received no more than a general impression of ugliness, followed by another impression, equally vague, that she was not so ugly as he had thought. But now some detail was creeping into the picture. She was fifteen years old, about a month older than he, who would be fifteen in a couple of weeks. Though tall, she had not the figure of a girl of her age, being extremely slight of bust and hip, and her cotton skirt, which was much too short, made one think her younger than she was—an impression that faded directly one looked into her eyes. Claude scarcely admired her—his ideas of beauty were rather fluffier—but he liked to watch her as she stooped over the fire and encouraged the flame; he was glad when her hand touched his.

At last the kettle boiled, and they made tea—wretched smoky tea, but nectar to them, as they sat side by side among the wood-sedge and the slender milkmaids, their feet towards the fire, which smouldered still, and sent the delicious wood-smoke curling in the trees.

"Did you leave the letter?" asked Claude.

"Yes. I put it on Charley's table. I told him not to be anxious about us—we were quite safe."

"I hope they won't find us before the week's up."

"I'm afraid they will. But I expect we've two or three days clear. At any rate, we're not going to worry; we're going to enjoy this evening: it's the happiest we've either of us had so far."

It was—and farther than so far. When they had drunk the smoky tea and eaten the stale bread, they still sat side by side at the foot of the dingle. The sunset had left the hollow, but the leafage round the brim shone and trembled in the fading light. The silence was unbroken, save by distant farm-sounds, the occasional

canzone of a thrush, and their own voices. They talked almost in whispers, their heads very close, Claude's hand lying on Emily's arm, just above the wrist. They did not speak much, for the dingle was haunted—by the lengthening shadows, and their own half-understood happiness.

The sunset crept from the sallows and from the sky. The moon, the mists, and the dews rose.

"Are you cold, Emily?"

"No, thank you. Are you?"

"No—Emily, if we're found to-morrow, it 'ull have been worth while."

Charles's Wain had begun to show above the higher branches when they went to bed. The night was scarcely so silent as the evening; there was a rustle and a sough all through the dingle. Claude heard something scampering close to his tent. Then suddenly a nightingale began to sing, and his song was no mere lyric of individual hope. It was as if all the beauty of moonlight Doucegrove, the breeze, the sallows, the stars, and the dews, had found a voice—and tears.

He was half-undressed, but when he heard that song he ran out. The hollow was full of mist, above which rose the trees and the tops of the bushes, and suddenly amidst it he saw Emily. She, too, had run out to hear the nightingale.

He thought of slipping back, but she evidently saw no reason why they should not enjoy the beauty of mist, song, and stars simply because he was without his coat and waistcoat and she without her skirt.

"Isn't it glorious?" she whispered.

"Oh, Emily!" was all he could say.

"Listen to the lavant."

"I never heard it till now."

"It's the night that makes things sound so clear. Good-night, Claude."

He went up to her, and put his arms round her, his heart full of something that tore it. There in the misty

hollow they clung together, and he kissed her and kissed her, with none to see them but the stars and the silent nightingale.

He was too happy to sleep; he was too close to the green earth. He lay wakeful as a lover on his first night beside his mistress. The nearness of Nature almost terrified him—her sighs, her stirrings, the faint sobs of her breath—and once or twice he sat up, his arm round his knees.

However, he must have dozed after sunrise, for there was a blank between the red sword that shot between his tent-curtains and Emily's voice telling him that breakfast was ready.

He flung on his clothes and went out. The sunshine was already in the dingle, but the air was cold. He warmed his hands at the fire, and afterwards on the teacup that Emily gave him.

"The tea isn't smoked this morning," she said.

"No—I was a beast to let you light the fire by yourself."

"You were asleep. I've been up since sunrise."

"I haven't slept all night."

"Nonsense!"

The sun showed a golden rim above the sallows; hitherto his light and warmth had reached them in flecked shafts through the undergrowth.

"I wonder what time it is," said Emily.

"It must be between eight and nine, judging by the sun. Hark! Did you hear anything?"

"Yes," said Emily, and they both listened.

There was a rustling in the bushes a few feet above them.

"I expect it's only a rabbit."

"I dare say that's all. Have some more tea, Claude?"

He handed her his cup, but the next moment it dropped among the milkmaids, as a loud peal of laughter rang through the dingle.

" Good Lord ! What's that ? "

" Oliver ! " gasped Emily.

The bushes swayed and cracked as Oliver dashed through them, and flung himself laughing on the sward by the fire.

" Oh, you two bally idiots ! " he spluttered. " I've been watching you these last five minutes. What do you think you're doing down here, you cuckoos ? "

For a moment they were dumb.

" Eavesdropper ! " cried Claude at last.

" Rats ! " retorted Oliver. " I've as much right here as you."

" How did you know we were here ? "

" I didn't know. I'm out with Wiggs, and he bolted off after a rabbit. I thought he'd come down here, so I followed him—that's all."

" There he is, over by the lavant," said Emily, as the terrier scampered through the hazel-bushes, hot in the pursuit of imaginary prey. " Wiggs, come here ! He might attract people's attention if he showed himself at the top."

" We're bound to be discovered, anyhow," growled Claude.

" You mean I'll split on you ? "

" Well, I don't see how you can help it, unless you tell lies. Everyone at home——"

" But I'm not going home."

" What do you mean ? "

" I'm going to stay here with you, of course. This looks a ripping spree."

He sat up, and began to devour a piece of bread.

" Haven't had breakfast yet—beastly hungry."

" Look here," cried Claude, " you clear out."

" I'm hanged if I do. Why should you two have all your sport to yourselves ? I think it was bally mean of you not to have asked me to come."

" If I were you I shouldn't care to invite myself where I'm not wanted."

"It'll be much better for you if I stay. Everyone at home does nothing but talk about you, and perhaps they'll be asking me questions, or perhaps I shall let something out by mistake."

Claude looked despairingly at Emily. Was it this he had risked so much for? She was fidgeting rather nervously with the tea-things, now glancing at him, now at Oliver.

"It'll be hard for him not to let out something if he goes back," she said at last. "Now he's here, I should think it would be safest for him to stay."

Claude rounded upon her almost fiercely.

"Look here—I'll get into a justabout hemmed row for doing this. I'll be thrashed within an inch of my life—it 'ud have been worth it if he hadn't come, but now—now——"

"Don't be an owl," said Oliver.

"We can't help it," said Emily, putting her hand on his shoulder—"we can't help it, so there's no use whining. He'd much better stay—you know he can't keep secrets."

"I think we'd better all go home," said the boy miserably. "There won't be any more sport now."

"Oh, don't be such a brute, Claude. It's you, not Oliver, who's spoiling everything."

"But we shan't have enough to eat if we stay. We brought only enough food for two, and we can't possibly buy any more."

"We can shoot birds," said Oliver. "You've got a gun."

"Yes—and they'd hear the shot at Doucegrove, and we'd be found, and sent to gaol for poaching into the bargain."

"I'm sure there's some way of managing," said Emily. "Don't growl any more, please."

Her hand slid from his shoulder to his clenched fist, and her eyes looked miserably into his. He felt a lump rise in his throat. Why did she take Oliver's part? She

had not uttered a word of reviling, even of protest. Doubtless she had reason on her side when she supported him in his wish to stay, but he found it hard to think that she had dealt so gently with the destroyer of their happiness.

"Oh, Em!" he cried wretchedly.

"Make the best of it," she pleaded.

"Very well. I suppose we can't help ourselves. Come, Oliver, don't eat all the bread. Give me a piece."

He snatched the crust handed him, and munched sullenly and in silence. The sun shone as brightly as ever, the thrushes sang as noisily, and the flowers and the young green smelt as sweet, but brightness, scent, and music had stolen from his day.

Oliver had soon, to use his own expression, made the loaf "look silly," and scrambled to his feet, flinging his remains of crust to the dog.

"What beastly stale bread! I'm hanged if I can live on this sort of thing for a week. Let's shoot some sparrows for dinner."

Emily and Claude both started up as he seized the gun.

"Put that down at once!" shouted young Shepherd.

"Why? I know how to handle a gun as well as you."

"They'll hear the shot at Doucegrove. Put it down!"

"Rats! Don't be a fool!" as Claude grasped his wrist. "Leave hold, I say, or——"

There was a bang. The gun went off, and kicked Oliver on to his back. He sprang up as Claude bent over him and struck him violently in the face.

"Take that, you interfering brute! What d'you mean by hanging on to me when I'm holding a gun? I might have killed myself."

"Gammon! It's your fault the thing went off. You pressed on the trigger. You don't know how to hold a gun."

"You'd better take care what you say."

" I'll say what I please, and, what's more, I'll give you the heaviest licking you ever had in your life."

" Right you are ! I'll stand up to you, and we'll see who'll get the licking. Emily can be referee. I say, what's the matter, Emily ? "

Emily was sitting on the ground, her hand twisting her skirt, Wiggs, the little terrier, licking her face, which was very white.

" My foot," she said—" the shot went into it."

" Oh, Lord ! " cried Shepherd, and fell on his knees beside her.

" Don't touch it, Claude."

"Poor old Em ! " cried Oliver. " I'm beastly sorry."

Claude turned on him with a shout of rage, but Emily seized his arm.

" Don't fight, you two ! Don't fight, you two ! " she repeated miserably.

" We'd better not, for we'll have to carry you home between us," said Claude, with sudden calmness.

" I never thought the gun was pointing your way," stammered Oliver. " Why didn't you sing out at first ? "

" Because I know better than to whine when I'm hurt."

" Which foot is it ? "

" The right. Must I go home, Claude ? I suppose I must."

" Of course you must. Come, cross hands with me, Oliver—bend down—there, Emily, put your arm round my neck."

" Shall we carry her to Doucegrove ? "

" Oh, no ! " cried Emily. " Take me home. I'd rather get it over."

Claude whistled to the terrier, and they lifted the girl. She was not heavy, and they had little difficulty in carrying her up the steep side of the dingle. At the top young Shepherd looked back through the sallows. He could see the tents, and the blue smoke still curling up

from the fire. A rush of tears made the red shame burn on his cheek.

Emily did not speak a word as they carried her across the meadowland outside the dingle, neither did she cry. Claude wished that she would cry.

CHAPTER VI

PERHAPS EMILY WOULD CRY IF SHE KNEW—A GOOD LAD ON THE WHOLE—FATE AND JAMES—THE PARTING

THE yellow afternoon was drifting into the red evening. Claude lay on his bed, his face hid in the pillow. The farm-sounds crept through the open window—the lowing of hungry calves, the gurgle of young ducks, the cluck of hens scratching for maggots, the stamp of stalled cart-horses. Now and then he lifted his head, and saw the sunset shimmering in the poplar, and the pink fan of a cloud spread against the dim evening blue. The next moment he would let it drop, and at the same time try to shift his body into an easier position.

A flock of sheep had just been driven into the yard, and he lay listening dully to their bleating He felt shaken and stupid, though now and then the mists that clouded his brain would part, and he would think poignantly of Emily Had the shot been removed? had it hurt her much? Poor Emily! He felt responsible for her misfortunes, as, indeed, he was to a certain extent. Once he fell into a kind of doze, and saw the hollow at Doucegrove, with the two tents and the column of wood-smoke. But the dream passed, and, opening his eyes, he found that Dora had come into the room.

"Get up, Claude. Uncle Charley wants to see you."

He stared at her stupidly.

"Come, make haste. He can't wait all night. Don't pretend you're killed."

She came closer to the bed, and pulled down his shirt from his shoulder

" Pat hasn't given you so very much, after all—not half for what you deserve for frightening us so."

" Were you frightened, Dora ? "

" Reckon I was—fairly cried myself to sleep last night."

" I'm sorry," the boy mumbled, as he slid from the bed, and his heart throbbed with an uneasy gush of penitence.

Charley Shepherd was in the parlour, sitting under a print of Bishop Burnet, who frowned portentously over his head. Claude remembered how he had bought the picture for James, seven years ago, when his brother's gift of a dormouse had stirred up his gratitude. " Portraits of Divines—twopence each. Hundreds to choose from," was the notice he had seen outside a shop in Hastings. The very thing for James ! and he had chosen Bishop Burnet as the most imposing of the collection. But that day the worthy prelate seemed to wear a stern, almost menacing look, an exaggerated reflection of James's own countenance, as he sat on the edge of his chair, trying to appear unconscious of the manure-stains his boots had made on the carpet.

" Well, Claude," said Parson Charley, " your brother and I have been talking about you for two solid hours."

" How's Emily ? "

" A little better, I'm glad to say. The doctor has removed the shot—fortunately, only a small amount had entered her foot. But it's you I want to talk about, not Emily. How would you like to go to school ? "

" Oh . . ." Claude's jaw fell. Of late school had lost its attraction ; he had been happy in a life of healthy toil and congenial comradeship, and the exploits of Jones Minor in *The Hartwood House Boys*, and of Mr. Smith, the Usher, in *The Blood on the Schoolroom Floor*, had been robbed, by growing taste, of their allure.

" You're becoming rather a mixed blessing, you know," said the curate, with a grin. " That escapade of yours

and Emily's was really the limit. I think it's a mistake to keep a great fellow of your age cooling his heels at home."

"I ain't cooling my heels, and I don't want to go to school. I should justabout hate it. I——".

"Hush!" said James sternly.

"I thought you'd like it. Oliver's unaccountable pleased at the idea," said Charley, dropping into persuasive Sussex. "He didn't care for school six years ago, but I think he's beginning to find lessons at home middling tame, and so they are."

"I don't want to go."

"Why?"

He had a dozen reasons, at once too mighty and too trivial to express.

James took him roughly, but not unkindly, by the arm.

"Now, pull yourself together, will you? We've had to punish him, sir, for his tomfoolery, and I don't think he's done sulkin' yet. He'll come to himself in an hour or so. He's a good lad on the whole, though you wouldn't think it, to look at him now."

"I suppose I ought to have thrashed Olly," said the curate, "but somehow it never occurred to me—shows I've forgotten my own upbringing, doesn't it, Jamie? He'll be all the better for a little discipline at school. The more I think of it, the more sure I am that it's a mistake to keep boys at home; they either turn out milksops or play the fool."

"But I've my work," stammered Claude, "and I haven't ever played the fool except this once. I don't see as it'll do me any good to go to school now. I'm too old for starting things, like. I'm nearly fifteen, and——"

"Now don't let's have no more of your nonsense," said James. "This comes of treating him like a reasonable bein', sir. I told you how it 'ud be. We'd much better settle things without him. You clear off, my lad, and your uncle and I 'ull talk this over. Clear off,

I say, unless you want some more of what you got before dinner."

Claude held out his hand to his uncle, and went.

There was a bench in the passage, by the back-door. He sat down on it, leaning his elbow on his knee, his chin on his hand. The wind was rising, and puffed into the house. The cowl of the oast across the lane groaned as it swung, and the poplar shook its leaves noisily. It was then he knew his bitterest reason for hating the thought of school. There, still at home, he experienced his first qualm of home-sickness. Slowly before his eyes passed the Sussex landscape : he saw little hollows in Lordship Wood, and high meadow stretches by Conster Farm ; he saw the strawberry foam of orchards, the heyday green of May leafage, farm-ponds that reflected farm poplars and farm-steading ; he saw a sallow-fringed dingle in the fields by Doucegrove.

Then he felt something pricking the back of his eye-balls, and sprang at once to his feet. He had all a boy's shame and scorn of tears ; he was in the throes of reaction, and weak with pain and want of food, or he would not have shed them. He rushed blindly towards the stair-foot, but on his way encountered James.

" Hello ! What's the matter now ? "

" Nothing," stammered the lad, and would have pushed past him had not his brother seized his arm.

" What ! still harpin' on that string ? You're like an old woman whose rent has been raised." He looked at him for a moment, then his tone and his expression changed.

" I reckon you're middlin' set about with all that's happened. Come along with me to the kitchen, and Dora shall make you a cup of tea."

During the weeks that followed, the word " school " was not uttered in Claude's hearing, and he began to hope it was forgotten. Time was as before, except that only Oliver shared his lessons at the Church Cottage. It was

more than a week before he was allowed to see Emily, and then the interview was short, and, owing to the presence of Miss Kingsley, constrained. After a fortnight, she began to limp about the house and garden, but Claude noticed that he and she were never trusted alone.

The early hay-crops had been cut, and the summer holidays were close at hand when he was told his fate. The silence of his elders had been but a secret place for scheming. In September he was to go to school at Eastbourne. It was not a private school, neither was it a grammar-school, but a hybrid institution, managed by a board of directors, and paying an irregular dividend to its preference shareholders. There were about a hundred boys, drawn chiefly from the trading classes. Oliver would not accompany him, as he was to go to the Sons of the Clergy School at Leatherhead, where the fees were less than half those of Hughenden House.

Claude was not particularly disappointed to find that young Mills was no longer to share his school-days. Of late their friendship had been struggling against a series of quarrels and perfunctory reconciliations, and Oliver's behaviour at Doucegrove had given a heavy blow to that which had already been smitten. It was with very different feelings that he heard Emily was to go to Ireland, where a friend of Miss Kingsley's kept a school near Ballina. This meant that she would not come home for the holidays, unless, perhaps, at midsummer, as the journey was too long and too expensive. The former sentence had been judgment; this was doom, and stirred up all the revolt and fury latent in the boy's outwardly docile nature. There were plenty of girls' schools at Eastbourne. Why did they not send her there? Why should a grovelling matter of credit and debit part him from his young mate? At first he had faced his future in meekness; he knew the folly of kicking against the decrees of Fate and James. But now his heart burned with sedition; he sulked and scowled for the rest of the day, and the next morning, when his brothers happened to allude to the subject of school,

he swore openly. He was not given to sulkiness or swearing, his protests usually taking a more dutiful, if more emotional form, and James was so much at a loss how to deal with the new phase, that when, over the sheep-shearing, Claude's rage burst forth again, he forsook the path of custom, and, ordering the lad into the oast-barn, he tied his wrists to one of the upright beams, and left him there. A flogging would perhaps have done him more good, for he was in a wretchedly self-pitying frame of mind, to which three hours' cramp and hunger only ministered. But the punishment undoubtedly produced the effect his brother wished, for by the time he was set free, scolded and given some supper, he had learned the folly of rebellion, and there were no more undignified kicks at the inevitable.

Claude woke early on the day he was to leave Spell Land, and sat up in bed, listening to a morning shower. The sky had cleared when he rose to dress, but the barn roofs were still wet, and the rain had called out the scent of September's first decays—a steaming atmosphere of bitter-sweet.

Breakfast was late, for Dora had overslept herself, doubtless because she had sat up till past one, finishing his shirts. There was no time to eat much; besides, he was not hungry, and had soon swallowed his last mouthful of stewed tea.

It happened that the autumn term at St. John's, Leatherhead, began on the same day as at Hughenden House, and James had offered to drive both boys to the station. Claude was in the spirit of solid meekness, and tried hard not to blink when Dora kissed him. Patrick was in an infernal temper, his filly having broken her knees out cubbing early that morning; but his black brows unbent as Claude shook hands with him, and, after much fumbling in his breeches pocket, he produced five shillings, and, after much cogitating, the advice to "lick every feller that meddles with you."

Soda, the roan gelding, made short work of the drive

to Easeham, and James had time for only about a third of the good advice which the recent study of *Eric; or, Little by Little*—a farewell present to Claude from Miss Kingsley—urged him to give his brother. However, the whole would not have been less vain, Claude being wrapped in meditations of his own, into which James's questions now and then broke trivially. " Oh yes—he promised—he would say his prayers "—having prayed genuinely but once in his life, backwards, in the oast-house.

They found Oliver stamping with impatience when they reached the Church Cottage. He looked upon school very differently from Claude and very differently from his own spirit of earlier years. He had realized that lessons with his stepfather were tame, and life in general at Easeham more or less " rotten." He was eagerly anticipating an army of loyal chums and " decent cricket "—though his hand had sought Emily's tremblingly more than once under the breakfast-table that morning—and he had collected a satisfying amount in tips, which he showed triumphantly to Claude, who had been given only a pound as his term's allowance, including five shillings from his uncle, and the same from David Gilmour.

Young Shepherd stood sullenly on the doorstep, knowing that Emily was beside him, and wishing she would speak.

" When do you start for Ireland ? " he asked her, as Oliver shook himself free of his aunt's embrace.

" To-morrow morning."

" Are you coming with us to the station ? "

" There isn't room in the trap."

Oliver's box was being lifted up beside Claude's tin trunk. Miss Kingsley and Charley Shepherd stood in the road, and Emily and Claude were alone on the doorstep. He noticed that she had plaited her hair. It did not suit her.

" You'll write to me, won't you, Em ? "

" Yes, if you'll answer my letters."

" Of course I shall. You might trust a fellow to behave decently."

He took her hand to say good-bye, for James was beckoning to him. He hesitated whether he should kiss her—he had been told they were too old to kiss. She seemed uncertain, too, and, after staring at each other for a moment, they both flushed and turned away.

CHAPTER VII

TRANSPLANTED—"SELF-CONSCIOUS ASS"—THE FOURTH-FORM IDEA—OBITUARY

MOST young animals adapt themselves pretty easily to new surroundings, and Claude was no exception, though at first he found them hardly congenial. Never, since he was seven years old, had he gone to bed so early as nine, and for some time force of habit woke him every morning at five, to lie tossing, a prey to home-sickness, till the passage bell rang two hours later. "I seem to spend most of my time in bed," he wrote to Mr. Gilmour, "and I don't get enough to eat." The meals were plentiful, but Claude was used to unlimited "snacks" between times—either a glass of ale with Patrick and James, or a cup of tea with Dora, who must have drunk about seven or eight pints a day. At Spell Land, too, they had tea at all their meals, and a dinner-table on which there was nothing to drink but water struck him as a depressing mixture of ungenerosity and religion.

The flesh proved itself more adaptable than the spirit. Long after he had ceased to crave for the tinned and stodgy abundance of Spell Land, he craved for Spell Land itself. His nights were tragic with alluring dreams of an ugly little red-brick house, perched on the hill above Loneham. He wandered round the garden; he looked into the haggards; he called to the dumb creatures. He yoked his horses, and drove them through the October lanes, where the red leaves of the hedgerows trailed down the banks and across the marle. He smelt the last hops drying in the oasts, and saw the steam of the furnaces float through

the cowls. He woke in his narrow bed, in a row of narrow beds, and found nothing of his dream except the craving.

But life was too full for nostalgia, except in the early lie-awake morning. Claude was put into the Upper Fourth, and found that he had to work hard to maintain even a respectable position. He had been a backward little wretch when he first went to his uncle, and as his progress had depended to a great extent upon his own exertions, it had followed inclination along paths which he was told led nowhere in the world of school and Cambridge Locals. Fortunately, he had one sound acquirement—the capacity for work. He realized that he would probably have to leave school early, and that he must make the best of his time ; so he worked with all his might and self-denial, and the following autumn won his remove into the Fifth.

He did not find, however, that his habits of industry brought him any particular regard from his schoolfellows, or even from his masters. Industry was, after all, only half the whole duty of man ; the other half, and the better half, was football. Claude had never played anything but cricket, and that under very indifferent circumstances ; still, he was agile and sound-winded, and took his place for the first time at compulsory games with feelings of ambition, spiced with hope. But he soon found that his companions had no intention of putting up with initial shortcomings, and when he heard himself called " rotter " all over the field, anxious and injured pride changed awkwardness into downright incompetency. He felt that his reputation was at stake, and when he dragged his muddy footsteps into his room, to change before tea, he knew that he had lost it. It made no difference that he could groom a horse as well as ride him, that he could mend a gate, shear a sheep —in fact, earn his living—because he had never played football, he was a muff and a rotter, with no hopes of living down his shame till he had made a neat pass or saved a goal.

This, at any rate, was his own view of his position, and the gravity of it seemed daily to increase. He had taught

himself to ride and swim, and neither his seat nor his stroke were to be despised ; but with his football knickers he put on a stumbling awkwardness and idiocy which made him the source of his companions' merriment, as well as the butt of their impatience. He was a good runner, but the quick-fire of derision put lead into his limbs ; his tackling was uncertain, his kicking wild, and endless penalties were the result of his powerlessness to keep his hands from the ball. His face soon became white and dabbled with sweat, and his fellow footballers unanimously declared that Shepherd was a sight for the gods.

The result of these inglorious afternoons was that he shrank more and more into himself. He had no wish to contribute to the merriment of life, so he avoided those who laughed, spending his spare moments in odd corners with a book from the school library, or sauntering about the playground, wishing he was at home, where incompetency was kicked instead of laughed at.

It is doubtful how long this state of affairs would have lasted had not one of the masters—a vigorous young fellow, who thought more of his Blue than his B.A.—found him out, and, dragging from him a confession of his misery, called him a " conceited, self-conscious ass," and taken himself off with a grimace.

Up till then he had never doubted that his nervousness was due to an exaggerated humility, as praiseworthy as it was uncomfortable ; but the English-master's words made him think. Perhaps, after all, it was conceited to mind so much what other fellows thought. He resolved to reform himself that very afternoon. He cut no great figure at first, but towards the end of the game Fate became old-fashioned, and virtue was rewarded. The occasion was a penalty-kick at goal, Claude being goal-keeper. " There's four up," said one of the enemy, the score standing at three. The gibe put young Shepherd on his mettle. He bent and twisted, with clutching fingers, while a forward walked up to the ball and coolly measured his distance. The next moment he bounded high in the

air, just managing to touch the ball before he toppled forward and sprawled in the mud. " Saved ! " " Good old goaly ! " rang in his ears, as he picked himself up. The ball had been diverted round the post, and ten minutes later was at the other end of the field.

For the rest of that day Claude was just a healthy schoolboy—noisy, friendly, and superbly self-satisfied. By the end of the week it was decided that " Shepherd was on the mend. He really wasn't such a bad fellow, now that he'd given up losing his hair every time he made a fool of himself."

The stamp of boy at Hughenden House did not make a friend likely to outlive the ending of common work and play. The corporate spirit was much feebler than in schools of a better class, with the result that individual friendships did not thrive. Still, Claude found most of his schoolfellows good comrades in the playing-field and the classroom, and on Saturday afternoons, when he was asked home by those who lived near, or wandered with other exiles on the downs, or over the flat, dull fields, infected already by the town spirit, and pocked with an eruption of brick villas.

Under the stress of new comradeships and new quarrels, he seemed almost to lose sight of the old. He and Oliver Mills wrote to each other during the first term, but later their friendship scarcely reached the energy of pen and ink, and their intercourse might have ended altogether had it not been for the holidays. Even these helped to emphasize the passing of the old affections. Oliver had a succession of friends to stay with him at the Church Cottage, and Claude had to work hard on his brothers' acres, making up as well as might be for his absence during the term. Nevertheless, they sometimes met and compared notes. Oliver evidently did not take a very brilliant place at St John's, though this was not due to want of abilities. He had, however, a good reputation at both football and cricket, being in the first eleven for the latter, their best fast bowler ; and it seemed that he also had some talent for drawing,

having won a bronze medal from the Royal Drawing Society.

Claude heard but little of Emily Branwell. One did not have much time to think of girls at school. After he had been at Hughenden House a couple of months, he found his views of the feminine slipping back into his childhood's perspective. The Fourth-Form idea was that all girls should be " sat on." He accordingly began to look on the equality to which he had admitted Emily as a piece of weak-kneed indulgence, and made haste to drop her into her right place in a man's retrospect.

It was near the end of his first term when he heard from her. He had almost forgotten her promise when an Irish post-mark and the handwriting he had seen in so many exercise-books brought back, half ashamed, something of the old emotion.

" My dear Claude,

" I should have written to you before, but I did not feel inclined to write to anyone." (From this he judged that she had been unhappy.) " I hope you like your school better than you expected. We haven't half enough work to do here. The girls say they are killed if they get two hours' prep. Claude, did you know how awfully girls swear ? At first I thought it must be only at this school, but Louie Fagan, who has been to two schools in England, says they swore just as much at those. I am in the Sixth Form, which is ridiculous, as I'm only fifteen, but I really know as much as the other girls in it. We are doing Henry VIII for history, New Zealand for geography, and Ezra and Nehemiah for Scripture. I don't like the lessons ; they are simply rotten. I am reading Emerson's *Essays*, which I like very much. I thought he sounded conceited at first, but now I think the opposite. I like that bit about the stars—' If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.' I always look at the stars when I am undressing at nights, and wishing I was alone. I like, too, to think they are shining over you and Oliver and Uncle Charley, and

it's just as if we were all in different parts of the same room. I'm writing to Oliver by this post. He'd be furious if he heard I'd written to you and not to him. You'll write soon, won't you ?

" Love from
" EMILY."

The old spirit was so well revived that Claude's anger flashed out at Emily's tactless allusion to Oliver. But the Fourth-Form idea had sunk rather deep into his outlook, and though the old affection surged under the schoolboy stiffness of his reply, it was scarcely a letter likely to comfort a home-sick girl, unless she could forget her sorrows in the thought of his prowess at football.

Claude had been at school about eighteen months when the unexpected and unwelcome broke in on his routine. It was announced in a letter from Patrick. Pat had not written to him since he came to school, and, knowing that a letter meant practically a day's work for him, Claude was flattered to see the creased envelope, addressed, apparently, by some backward Board-school child.

But he had not read three lines before his expression changed. He lifted his face, and looked quickly round the supper-table, then dropped the letter in his plate.

His uncle was dead.

The blow was so sudden that at first he scarcely felt the pain of it. Patrick told him that the curate had been ailing for some time, and had been ordered by the doctor to keep to the house. But an urgent summons had arrived from a dying shepherd at Little Night. The Rector was away, and even if he had been at home, poor Board would have preferred Parson Charley ; and in spite of Miss Kingsley's dissuasions, the curate set out, in the teeth of an east wind and driving sleet. As he was not back at dark, Miss Kingsley asked a Westfield-bound farmer to call at Little Night. On his way he found the parson lying unconscious by the roadside, and before a doctor could be

fetched he was dead. His heart had been diseased for some time, though the end was doubtless brought on by exertion and extreme cold. Claude, as he pieced together the circumstances from Patrick's rag-bag of tattered sentences, looked upon his uncle as a hero and a martyr, and wrote at once to his brothers, begging to be allowed to come home for the saint's burial.

Patrick and James did not see any reason for this, and Claude had to content himself with his eldest brother's account of it, mixed with the latest lambing news. The Shepherds of Spell Land considered that their uncle had made a worthy end, the glory of which reflected in some degree upon themselves. But their grief at his loss was not what it might have been three years ago. Of late they had been pondering whether, after all, the doubtful glories of the relationship were worth its undoubted trials. They had certainly scored over the matter of school, for though James had had to take up Charley's bill, he realized that a hundred and twenty pounds for six years' teaching was less than half what he should have paid if Claude had gone from the first to Hughenden House. However, during the last eighteen months the curate had been entirely on the debit side of the Spell Land account-book, and Patrick had grown less and less reticent about his wish to see him at the devil.

But Claude, as soon as the thrill of martyrdom had passed, was all grief. He had sincerely loved his uncle, who had always treated him kindly and generously, and his sense of miserable gratitude was increased when it appeared that the curate had left him fifty pounds in his will, of which, however, he never had a penny, everything having to go towards the payment of Shepherd's debts. After a time it came to be muttered among the well-to-do—the poor still cherished Parson Charley's name—that the best thing he could have done with his life was to lose it.

His relations were bequeathed nothing but debts. Miss Kingsley had a small income of her own, and Oliver inherited about fifty pounds a year from his mother ; but

Emily Branwell had depended on her foster-father's generosity, and though his will showed again and again that this had not lacked towards her, the will was, after all, no better than a sermon on what might have been, and Emily's modest bequest went the way of Claude's fifty pounds, into the creditors' pockets.

" She's going to stay on in Ireland," wrote James, " as a pupil teacher or something, and I expect as Miss Kingsley will do her best for her afterwards ; but it's hard on the poor girl, that it is. I don't think as Miss Kingsley means to leave these parts. She was middling haughty to me and Pat at the funeral."

Miss Kingsley had come to the conclusion that, when one has only a hundred pounds a year, and out of that has partially to support a boy and girl still at school, it is best to live in the country. Living at Easeham was decidedly cheap, and a conveniently sized cottage, at four pounds a quarter, was to let in the Cackle Street. Besides, her interests—those that were not centred in Oliver—lay in the parish where she had worked six years, an unusually long time as Charley Shepherd's curacies went. The only drawback was her brother-in-law's vulgar relations, but custom had to some extent staled their offensiveness, and, after all, they lived a good three miles out of the village, and now that Charley was dead there was no need to be friendly with them. Oliver seemed quite to have outgrown his fancy for Claude—young Shepherd and his set were not worth a parting and a transplanting.

Perhaps, also, there was another reason. Miss Kingsley was a woman of few affections, but those few victimized her unmercifully. She did not wish to leave poor Charley's grave to the tender mercies of the half-blind sexton, neither did she wish to be too far away to be able to talk over his memory with those who loved it, and, in spite of circumstances, kept it sweet.

CHAPTER VIII

PROSPECT AND RETROSPECT—THE SIXTH-FORM IDEA—CLAUDE SHOWS SOME SENSE, AND CONSCIENCE OBLIGES HIM WITH A SAMPLE OF FUTURE CONDUCT

THERE had been great discussions at Spell Land as to what young Shepherd was to do when he left school. James and Patrick declared their willingness to pay his expenses as a student of law or medicine, if he wished to follow in his uncle's footsteps and " be a gentleman " ; but they had also made a much more alluring offer. They would give Claude a third share in the farm as soon as he was twenty-one, on condition that he first served a kind of apprenticeship to them, and proved his mettle. The boy was inordinately proud of Spell Land, and thought it a golden fate to have a personal share in its glory. Of course, he would have liked to " be a gentleman," but as apparently that dignity was not to be won without a wearison probation on a clerk's stool or in a hospital ward, ambition wavered. He loved the fresh wind and the sky, the swing of constellations over dew-drenched fields at night, the germinal scents of spring, the rain, the frost on the grass ; the thought of further exile from the soil became, on contemplation, unbearable.

Besides, he disliked the idea of continuing not only profitless but expensive. His schooling had already cost his brothers as much as they could conveniently afford, and he felt that the best return he could make would be to devote to their service the education they had so generously given him.

There was also a third reason. During his school-years his love of reading had developed almost into a passion,

and he realized that as a farmer he would have more spare time for gratifying it than as a medical student or a lawyer's clerk. In winter the bands of toil were occasionally slack unto boredom, and he looked forward to long evenings with his new friends Shakespeare, Thackeray, and the Brontës, and to candle-light, lie-a-bed mornings when Defoe or that wise child William Blake should share his pillow. It would be a frank, windy, Burns-like existence, agreeing equally well with the muscles and the mind.

So at last his decision was made, and his fortunes were knit to the brown soil he turned with his hoe, to the ugly red house that looked down on his labour, and to the brothers and sister who had taught him to work and take cuffs without crying. James and Patrick had recently bought the farmstead known as Meadow Land, consisting of two hundred acres, mostly grass, and a dwelling-house, which they transformed into workmen's cottages. James told Claude that he should have a responsible position on this. He was, of course, very young, but his brothers would be at hand to direct and control him, and, as James vouchsafed, he " knew how to do things "—that is to say, he knew how James wished them done.

It was therefore decided that Claude should leave school as early as possible. He left about three months after his seventeenth birthday—nearly two years earlier than Oliver Mills.

" I made sure you'd stick on ages longer," said young Oliver on a chance meeting ; " you always were such a swotter, you know."

" It wouldn't do me much good if I stayed. I'm through the matric, and a farmer doesn't want inter-arts."

" So you're going to be a farmer, are you ? Great Scott ! I thought you'd take up something much more brainy. Look at me—I don't what you call stew, but when I leave, I mean to go in for the Civil. There are some jolly good things to be had in that line. I've half a mind to try for a secondary clerkship. The exam's pretty stiff, but I should think I'm bound to get through."

Claude did not share his confidence, but he said nothing, for he had an unlimited belief in young Mills's luck.

David Gilmour occasionally wondered whether Shepherd's school-days had been wasted. He realized the folly of educating a lad at home, but perhaps, having kept him so long in a tutor's study, it would have been as well never to have flung him into the bear-pit of school; for by the time he went to Hughenden House his peculiarities had become pretty well ingrained, and his schoolfellows' friendly derision, which might have worked wonders in a humble, pliable child, rather ministered to the antics of a young colt only too ready to kick up his heels.

In a way, the temptations of school-life had not been great. James need not have been anxious about his brother's prayers; it was the fashion to say them at Hughenden House. If a room-mate became obstreperous, one did not scruple to spring up in the middle and smack his head or thrash him with one's braces, but one went down on one's knees again as soon as he was brought to order. Neither was there much swearing, though often a good deal of "smut." The standard of honour was low—in this, above all, the school proclaimed itself second-class—but Claude was not likely to be corrupted in this respect; he was still reaping the aftermath of Emily Branwell's hardy crop; moreover, he had escaped the schoolboy mania for making himself one of a crowd, and was inclined to play the ass rather than the sheep.

However, to Hughenden House he owed an enlargement of his experience. His boyhood had never been sheltered, his guardians had seen no bliss in ignorance, and certain facts of life had always been more or less naked and unashamed. But he had felt little of what he knew; it was at school that knowledge passed into sensation. A far greater precocity of both outlook and experience was to be found at Hughenden House than at a better-class school. The Fourth-Form idea passed into the Sixth-Form idea, which was scarcely that of the Sixth at Eton. The Sixth-Form idea was the desirability and manliness of love;

the girls one had "sat on" in the Fourth, and neglected in the Fifth, now became objects of pride and battle. It was only green love, but, like most green things, it had the advantage of quick sap and some fragrance. The Sixth consisted of young fellows whose ages ranged from fifteen to seventeen—about the Fifth-Form age in a public school, where boys did not have to leave early, to join fathers and brothers in trade, or fight their way up into exclusive professions; yet almost every boy had some mysterious affair, about which—though he always maintained a decent reticence—he loved to drop broad, tickling hints, and which occasionally "got him into hot water."

There was a girls' school a little farther down the road, of about the same grade as Hughenden House. At a first-class ladies' school any softness of heart would have been as much despised as any frivolity of attire or fluffiness in hairdressing, but at Mrs. White's the pupils wore bead necklaces, tied their hair with huge bows, and captivated the hearts of the Sixth at Hughenden House. Claude became the inarticulate admirer of the head girl—a tall, firm-stepping creature, with thick hair and frank eyes; she had five other worshippers to his knowledge, but that did not trouble him a whit. He never spoke to her, and his attentions were confined to dropping a box of chocolates over the playground-wall, and seeing the contents eaten by the kindergarten; but he thought of her continually, making her the first heroine of his imagination. He imagined her at her desk, toiling strenuously for the Senior Oxford; he imagined her at her meals, eating the bread-and-butter, which has for some reason become the contemptuous symbol of her age and sex, but certainly involves healthy unfastidiousness and an honest appetite. He imagined her on the hockey-field, dribbling the ball victoriously into the circle, and thence triumphantly shooting her goal. Sometimes, indeed, he saw her on her way back from the field, her short skirt, splashed with mud, showing her clean-built legs, and her feet, which, in spite of the rib-soled boots, could not but tread gracefully—

not with the mince and glide some men call grace, but firmly planted, well lifted, and swung. He imagined her in her cubicle at night, combing her beautiful hair out before the glass, which also reflected, perhaps, her arm and strong, white shoulder.

The ending of his romance was in keeping with its progress. His heroine disappeared. He came back for his last term, and missed her face in the crocodile, and her legs in the returning hockey team. He heard that Nellie Bennett had gone to a school near Keswick, and at first he was disappointed, and conscious of a vacuum in his life. But after a while the vague regrets passed, and his romance ended, not as the romance of a novel—in tears—but as a romance of real life—in smoke. A week or two later he transferred his affections to another girl at Mrs. White's, who held them about a fortnight, and the remainder of his last term was spent in a whirl of changing fancy, which, in its increasing restlessness and bitterness, became near kin to love itself—the young love, first love, that bites so hard.

In the midst of this whirl he received his last letter with the Irish postmark. He had heard little or nothing of Emily Branwell for the last year, and her letters, when they came, seemed to grow stiffer and more constrained, modelling themselves, no doubt, on his own correspondence.

This letter contained her photograph. It had been taken at some second-rate shop in Ballina, and no doubt did not do her justice, but it told him that she was plain. Her features, though clear-cut, had always been large ; besides, she was dark, and he, like most people, had little admiration for hair, eyes, and skin of his own complexion ; unskilfully posed, moreover, she showed to the worst advantage her ill-made black dress. He laid the photograph aside, and before him rose the faces of other schoolgirls—blue-eyed, fair-haired, and clear of skin. He remembered that he used to like to look into Emily's face. But that was long ago, in a dingle by Doucegrove Farm.

On leaving school, Claude did not find his brothers' vow

to prove his grit merely a vain form of words. If he was to be their partner, he must show himself capable, hard-working, and enthusiastic, and they did not spare him. His mornings were spent with the live-stock, his afternoons in the hop-gardens, tramping hour after hour with the insect-sprayer ; his evenings were hideous with calculations and accounts ; besides, there were innumerable odd jobs to be done, and these he found more exhausting than the ordinary routine, for they fell to muscles already weary. One never knew when the day's work would end.

However, he managed to acquit himself fairly well, for after he had been at work about six months he struck rare gold—a compliment from James.

" You ain't such a bad feller now that your head's free o' nonsense," he said one evening, as they sat each side of the kitchen-fire, Patrick and two setter pups sprawling between them on the floor. " In a few years' time (D.V.) me and Pat 'ull be feelin' the good of you. We want a feller that's educated a bit, and yet doesn't mind getting his hands dirty. But," he added, discovering the signs of elation on his brother's tired face, " don't you go gettin' too big for your boots. You work well enough under orders, but I shouldn't like to trust you on your own."

Claude could not help realizing that he was right, for he knew that on his own initiative he was forgetful, unpractical, and occasionally rash. Nevertheless, before he had been in his brothers' service much more than a year, he conceived a happy thought, to which the farm owed a new measure of prosperity, in both prestige and finance.

Late in the December of '96 Hobbs of Winter Land lost his Royston Drayman. For nearly a week an atmosphere of suppressed excitement brooded over the district. Farmers drove their gigs and carters their teams out of their way, in order to hear the latest news at Winter Land. The vet.'s trap could be seen twice daily lurching in the ruts of the farm-drive, and outside the gate was always a group of curious neighbours, male and female, bursting to know the fate of the best sire in East Sussex.

But no amount of care or curiosity could save the Drayman from the consequences of an internal inflammation. There was much wagging of commiserating tongues and much drinking of cheap sherry at the Broad Oak Inn when the Cat's Green ploughman brought the news, and no doubt, also, a certain amount of that inward elation of which commiseration and sherry are the outward sign. Hobbs had done a good business with his brute ; no doubt the same satisfaction would have thrilled the same breasts if the Shepherds had " broke " at Spell Land.

Claude and his brothers heard the news from Bert Ticehurst, of Tanhouse Farm, who called on his way back from Robertsbridge Market—a journey which had been made elastic enough to include the five miles of shingly road round by Winter Land.

" Larmentable loss to Hobbs," said Patrick Shepherd. " He must have made a middling pile by the hire of that there stallion."

" He did, surelye ! That Drayman was the best sire hereabouts by a long way. Hobbs 'ud send him as far west as Chiddingly sometimes. That filly of Harman's, wot got fust prize at Canterbury last year, was a daughter of his. We'll justabout miss him at Tanhouse, and so'll every feller who's particular as to his colts."

" My eye ! " said Claude, " it wouldn't be a bad idea if——"

" What ? "

" If we were to buy a stallion at one of those swagger shows, and——"

" Don't be a fool," said James ; " we've no money to waste in that way, and nor has any sensible feller, I should think. Hobbs happened to have luck and fall on his legs, but this ain't the parish for a good horse, and generally that sort of business is like speculatin' in ten per cents."

Claud felt rebuked, and also rather injured, for he still thought that, though his idea might be bold, it was none the less brilliant. But that evening James met him on his

way back from Meadow Land, and he soothed his ruffled feelings.

"That wasn't a bad thought o' yours, my lad. Me and Pat have been talkin' it over, and, really, we think it 'ud pay us. But it 'ud never have done to have jumped at the thing before Ticehurst. They could scarce afford a donkey at Tanhouse, but they're mad enough and jealous enough for anythin'. Besides, Bert 'ud be sure to go babblin', and maybe they'd be settin' up a shire-horse at Ellenwhorne, or Vine's, or Great Night, or any other place where the feller's still got credit, though the cash has all gone long ago. If we're to take up that business, we can't afford no rivals—there ain't enough horse-breedin' done in these parts—I reckon we'll be able to go one better than Hobbs's Drayman, as we shan't mind spendin' a hundred or so on our feller."

"Where'll you buy him?"

"At one of the London shows—the Drayman came from Islington, and it 'ud never do if folk got to know we'd picked our man up in the back-lanes like, while Hobbs got his in the High Street. Of course, we'll have to find out whether Hobbs means to start again, for, as I've said before, we can't afford no rivals. But, though he always did well by the Drayman, he's lost heavy over his hops this year, and can't afford anything big just yet; and once we've started, 'tain't likely as he'll try to cut us out."

This struck Claude as taking rather a base advantage, and he communicated his doubts to James, who received them with scorn.

"As I've told you before, my lad, you've no head for business. Why should we sit still just because, if we go forward, we may knock over a silly fool who's been stupid enough to lose his hop harvest? That ain't the way the Lord deals with men. Doesn't it say in the Bible that from him that hath little shall be taken away even that which he hath, and to him that hath much shall much be given? Hobbs has tedious little in the way of both sense and £ s. d., so his Drayman's been taken away from him

and given, so to speak, to us, who're neither fools nor paupers. 'Take away his talent from him and give it to him that hath ten,' says the Gospel."

James with Scripture in his mouth was unanswerable, so Claude held his tongue.

The plan flourished and matured, and finally bore fruit in two third-class tickets to Charing Cross. The show lasted three days, so James had taken a room at the Prince of Wales, at the corner of Compton Street, Soho. He might certainly have chosen a lodging nearer his place of business, but omnibus and tram would cover the distance in less than half an hour, and as, on the other two occasions he had stayed in town, he and his father had slept at the Prince of Wales, it had become something like the Church of England—an institution sanctified by custom and the paternal blessing.

Besides, it was Claude's first visit to London, and he had begged that their position might be central; James had, moreover, agreed to go up on the morning before the show opened, that the afternoon might be devoted to sight-seeing. Patrick stayed behind at Spell Land, for the farm could not well be left without either him or James in lambing-time, and the latter had well-founded suspicions that if the lot were attractive and the bidding high, Pat might spend more than the reasonable sum they had set apart for the enterprise. But he had decided that he "might as well take the lad," and Claude had abandoned himself to an ecstasy of anticipation, rather marred by the thought that he was snatching the bread out of the mouth of Hobbs of Winter Land. Very slight evidence will, however, satisfy doubt when the witness is examined by inclination. Hobbs, getting wind of the enterprise, was reported to have said that he "reckoned as how they'd smash over it at Spell Land, and that he knew better than to waste any more money on shire hosses." The unprejudiced hearer would no doubt have traced this remark to an emotion similar to that which inspired the fox's criticism of the grapes he could not reach, but at that moment it

sufficed to make Claude's conscience—rather fuddled with desire—bring in a verdict of " Not guilty," and he set out that March morning in spirits exalted enough to survive a stuffy, rather train-sick, journey, followed by a six hours' tour of St. Paul's Cathedral, the Tower, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, and other shrines of James's imagination, followed by a supper of steak and tinned tomatoes, and a night made wakeful by the snoring of an unaccustomed bedfellow, and the roar of the Holborn traffic.

The show was not quite so successful as the brothers had hoped. The bidding was high, not only for the prize horses, but for the " commended." James had wanted to buy one of the latter, yet, as he had also resolved not to pay more than a hundred pounds, he had to make his choice from the rank and file, among which, however, were some good enough cattle. In the end he decided on a dark bay four-year-old, Prince Harold (Tom Drayman II—Meg of Easedale). On the whole he was pleased with his purchase.

" There's one thing you have to learn in business of this sort, my lad," he said to Claude, " and that's to be content with doin' things in a small way. If Pat had been here, he'd have bid for that Halifax Dray King as sure as fate—got him, maybe, for three hundred—and with what result ? Those swagger horses go into the swagger studs, and are worth their weight in gold, but they'd be no manner of use to us. We'd have to make big hirin' charges, and the folk round our parts can't afford to pay 'em. This feller 'ull do splendid for our business. My only fear is that he ain't a good feeder—seems a bit drawn up in the stomach. Pat never could stand a horse that wasn't a good feeder. Still, he's the best we can get for our money."

Claude was well content. He was thrilled by the beauty of the horse, and by the thought that it was partly owing to his enterprise that the noble beast had been added to the Spell Land stock. He had certainly made a brilliant start to his career as a farmer. On the journey home, the

pant and rattle of the train wove themselves into a clanking song of hope. They sang of spreading acres, fat beasts, wide barns, the rise of the yeoman farmer to be squire, magistrate, master of the foxhounds. He saw himself standing in the doorway of some time-mottled grange, his pink coat splashed with the mud of the acres over which he had galloped to the music of his pack. By his side was a presence, indefinite and featureless, but exhaling an atmosphere of comfort, adoration, and repose. That was his wife. It is right for a man to marry, thought Claude drowsily, and it is comfortable. Then his head fell back, and in sleep he exchanged his puddings in the air for worthier, bitterer dreams.

CHAPTER IX

A SPARK CAUGHT BY THE WIND—THE YEOMAN'S PROGRESS —SPELL LAND AGAINST OXFORD HOUSE—A NEW DANGER—CLAUDE LISTENS TO MUSIC AT TWILIGHT

OLIVER MILLS was not required to tempt his luck and Claude's faith in his luck by entering for a secondary clerkship. Just after he left school, in the summer of '97, Shepherd heard that he had obtained a clerkship at a West End branch of the London Joint-Stock Bank. One of the directors, it appeared, had been an old friend of his father, and, accidentally meeting Miss Kingsley in town, and hearing from her of the boy's great talents and small opportunities, had offered to give him a nomination.

Miss Kingsley was delighted with her own adroitness in securing the director's favour. She soon, however, received a ruthless blow in Oliver's refusal, first implied, but afterwards explicit, to have her to keep house for him. A school friend of his was a clerk in the Estate Duty Office, and he and Oliver had arranged to share diggings. Oliver was bursting with the thought of emancipation, and refused to tolerate his aunt's presence within ten miles. At first this decision showed itself in an unusual solicitude for her health, pointing out the disadvantage of leaving so bracing a hill-spot as Easeham, and an entirely new anxiety about her income, informing her how much cheaper it was to live in the country. Miss Kingsley was perfectly familiar with the last fact, but even her cherished notions of economy flopped down like a card-house before her love for her nephew. Oliver did not shrink from harshly intimating

his wish to be free of apron-strings, and Miss Kingsley gave up her pencil calculations of the cost of urban existence, and settled down to fate and vicarious happiness.

One would have thought that, under the circumstances, she might have had Emily Branwell home from Ireland; but she had never liked the girl, and nothing was heard of such a plan. Emily had not been at Easeham since Charley Shepherd's death, for Miss Kingsley swore that she could not afford the journey. She cost nothing at Ballina, for in consideration of her help in the school, she was given board and lodging free. She and Claude had given up writing to each other, for it is difficult to write to somebody one never sees, whose life-lines are diverging from one's own. Indeed, it seemed as if both Emily and Oliver were passing out of young Shepherd's existence. He looked up to the same sky, but the stars were fewer than those which had shone on his childhood.

However, a few months after Oliver's departure to London, Claude's friendship with him revived, like the brief flame of a spark caught by the wind before it goes out. It was the Whitsun Eve, and he was rabbit-shooting in the June swale, when he suddenly came across young Mills, sitting under a hedge by Gilly Wood, on his knee a drawing-book covered with little charcoal sketches of figures, chiefly in motion.

"Hullo!" said Shepherd, taken by surprise.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Oliver. "What an age since I've seen you! I'm down here for Whitsun—three days' leave."

"I never knew you sketched," and Claude stared stupidly at his block.

"This isn't sketching—just a little black-and-white memory work. I'm rather keen on it."

He made a few apparently careless strokes with the pencil, and Claude's own face stared up at him from the paper.

"My eye!" he drawled. "Where did you learn?"

" I learned at school, but I've taken it up seriously this last month or two."

" How do you get the time ? " Claude had visions of Oliver working fourteen hours a day on a high stool.

" Oh, I've loads of time—bank shuts at five every day, you know, and at two on Saturdays. I go to the Grosvenor Life Studio three evenings a week. They say I ought to do well in black-and-white."

His pencil moved again, and this time a girl's face appeared. Oliver drew a line across it impatiently.

" Rotten ! " he commented. " She looks heaps madder than that."

" Who is she ? "

Oliver flushed and sniggered a little.

" That's Mad Maisie—she's sister of a chum of Carter's. She's an awful rag."

" Are you sweet on her ? " Claude asked naïvely.

Oliver growled, and churned up the mud with his boot. He was handsomer, Claude thought, than when he had last spoken to him ; his additional height and manliness became him well, so did the black down on his upper lip, and his thick black brows and hair. Perhaps his face was a trifle too florid, but Shepherd, being sallow, did not dislike his floridity as he disliked—he could scarcely tell why—the full, loose curves of his mouth.

" Have you heard anything of Emily lately ? " he asked.

" Not much. She writes to Aunt Ethel once a month, and she wrote to me when I got that berth. I should think she must be having a deuced dull time over there in Ireland. If I wasn't going with Holliday to the Broads for my summer leave, hang me if I wouldn't go and rout her out. Poor old Em ! "

" How do you like your work ? " Claude asked abruptly.

" I don't think much of it, but I get no end of sport out of working hours. I've come to know lots of fellows, some of 'em at the J. S., and some pals of Carter's, and we have the most devilish larks. I—I say, Claude—do you know ?—I've been drunk."

The mixture of childish elation and sheepish shame in his voice and face made Shepherd laugh. Oliver was in many ways much younger than he.

"You needn't laugh," grumbled Mills.

"I ain't laughing—and it won't be a laughing matter for you if you're sacked."

"Teach your grandmother!" cried Oliver, completely forgetting the dignity incumbent on one who has reached the manhood of intoxication.

"I promised my sister a brace of conies for supper to-night," said Shepherd. "I must be moving on, or the light 'ull be too bad."

Claude was happy enough in his life and work at Spell Land—not so happy, perhaps, as six years ago, but happier than he would have been away from the fields. Meadow Land throve under its new management; the low-lying ground by the Brede River was drained, with the result that the Shepherds had enough pasture for another dozen shorthorns. This encouraged them to establish in Hastings the milk-round which soon became one of the most prosperous branches of their business. They also had good success with Prince Harold; he was exhibited at the county show, where he won a second prize, and, helped by a little advertising in the local paper, his yearly round was larger than that of Hobbs's Drayman.

Shepherd was happier in the fields than in his home, for there they would sometimes quarrel. He was not quarrelsome by nature, and he and his brothers were generally on very good terms; but when three men, utterly wearied by bodily labour, and fretful with the mental anxiety which is inseparable from modern farming, meet in cramped, stuffy quarters at twilight, high words accompany every difference of opinion, and sometimes hard blows follow on high words, to the tears and terror of the womenfolk.

Claude occasionally found refuge from the Spell Land

kitchen, with its muddle of men and dogs, in David Gilmour's cool, bare room at Widow's Farm, where the moon was allowed to fling the shadows of the trees on the lampless wall. These sabbaths were in rough contrast to the rest of his life, not only on account of their peace, but on account of their culture and mysticism. Gilmour saw at once that he had an influence to correct—not that he had any wrong-headed objections to the life Claude had chosen to live, but he realized the dangers of its stolidness. The boy had lately shown signs of exchanging his castles for puddings, also a disquieting tendency to kick the ideal out of such realities as work, progress, attainment, marriage, and fatherhood. Fully aware of the restive imagination and spiritual impulse still unstifled in young Shepherd's heart, the minister realized the need for a counteracting refinement. With this, Claude's life might be made beautiful ; without it, it ran the risk of thickening into a hard and hideous materialism.

The refinement needed was not so much of habit as of thought. The boy's mind was becoming coarse-meshed, catching only the obvious, were it of truth or of falsity. During his uncle's lifetime the refining influence had been strong—Charley Shepherd might have been a son of the people, but he was none the less a son of the Church, which, even in the grossest ages, has stood for culture—the foolishness of the spiritual being in every way more educative than the wisdom of the material, the imaginative lie more civilizing than the scientific fact. Now that he was dead, none seemed likely to take his place. His successor at Easeham, though intellectually and spiritually fit to carry on, even to improve, his work, was separated from Claude by a stiff tissue of circumstances. He was unmistakably a gentleman and a scholar—after Charley Shepherd's death the Rector had been heard to swear that his next curate should be no back-door man from Durham, and had inserted " Ox. or Cam." and " Priv. Means " in his advertisement—but he was also a man of isms, chiefly Ritualism, leavened with Christian Socialism, and salted

with a little Higher Criticism. All three were abomination to James Shepherd, who ruthfully compared his Popish inanities and rationalist profanities with " poor Charley's " rigid loyalty to the Thirty-Nine Articles and the six days of Creation ; but the chief barrier between Spell Land and the Church Cottage was his bricks-and-mortar Socialism, his untiring efforts to hitch the Shepherd waggons to the stars—not always made in a spirit befitting one who has to deal with a Rector's warden. He was a young man, fresh from his University and a University settlement, and James's ethics on the subject of rural housing, payment, unemployment, and sanitation, fitted in neither with Oxford nor with Oxford House.

This, or rather the interfering spirit of this, stood between Claude and a good comrade, for, though neither he nor Patrick would have joined James in wringing hands over a coloured stole or the *Origin of Species*, they were both up in arms at the thought of any slur being cast on the integrity of Spell Land—hints that James was the fosterer of disease because he could not afford to retile Bellhurst, and of immorality because he had let—and at a hemmed low rent, too, sir—a two-roomed cottage to a man with six grown-up sons and daughters.

There was also a second and stouter barrier of Claude's own erection, the thought of which pained Gilmour acutely, for he knew that the barrier was he, himself. Claude, being a moral and intelligent creature, might in course of time come to see the reasonableness, or at least the fitness, of a Christian priest's protest against conditions he thought unchristian ; but he would never forgive, forget, or understand the curate's hostility to David Gilmour. Not that there was any open warfare, but there was alienation, and, on the part of the younger man, misconception, with attendant bitter feeling. Mr. Dumbleton could have tolerated, though never respected, heresy, but when he saw the schismatic minister combining Swedenborgianism with occasional worship before an Anglo-Catholic altar, he felt towards him very much as an

allopathic doctor feels towards a homœopath willing on occasion to prescribe according to the College of Physicians.

Claude was, in rather a self-conscious way, devoted to Gilmour, and resented any exception being taken to his conduct, though he himself found it sometimes rather bewildering. He had never come into sympathy with the doctrines of the New Church, but he was very far from hostile. The minister sometimes feared that his tolerance rested on no better basis than indifference, a temporary—or perhaps, indeed, eternal—lulling of the spiritual faculty which had tortured his imaginative childhood. He had no wish to entice him from the Church of his fathers ; like his master, he hated proselytes. Moreover, of late years he had ceased to look upon Swedenborgianism as a separate creed, but rather as the algebra of life, which could work out calculations difficult to accomplish by means of ordinary arithmetic. He distinctly felt, however, that Claude had no head for ordinary arithmetic, and if this sum was to be worked out correctly, he must be taught something of the algebraical signs of degrees and correspondences. But the boy was not strong enough in simplicity to be able to ride down the ridiculous, and showed, moreover, a sick impatience of anything which could be called " religion," from church on Sundays to the Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Providence.

This spiritual sloth was a grave obstacle in the path of culture, along which Gilmour swore that the lad should tread, in spite of corduroys. But, having failed to educate him as to his spirit, the minister resolved to educate him as to his mind. In this he was more successful. Claude had soon read every one of " the only books in the world worth reading." His literary taste was not bad. If he revelled in the floridity of Lytton and the more mawkish passages of Dickens, he also had a keen relish for the vigours of Defoe, the delicacy of Mackenzie, and the innocence of Blake. Moreover, he showed a real appreciation of the eighteenth-century novel ; it did the minister's heart good to hear him laughing over Tom Jones, and to

see him squirming over the agonies of Clarissa Harlowe or Pamela Andrews.

Thus time wore on, through germinal April and May, to the months of sunburn, crop, and harvest. Claude worked with a will, read, ate, and slept, and came often of an evening to Widow's Farm, to talk of the day's toil and joke. But as the months passed, a new spirit crept slowly into these twilight conversations, changing the nature of Gilmour's fear. The lad began to tell him, not so much of what he had done, and said, and read, as of what he had thought and felt. The change was very gradual, but it was enough to put the minister on his guard. He should have seen it from the first—the chief danger of Claude's stolid existence was not stagnation, but reaction. This contented, sturdy, hard life could not for ever satisfy a lad of imagination; already he detected a struggling spirit, an ideal demanding careful nurture, a precocious knowledge demanding—more dangerously—precocious experience.

"I wish I could fall in love again," said Claude one evening in September, when he and his team-load of mangolds met Gilmour at the foot of Easeham Hill.

"I wish you could, and I expect you soon will. But take care that you fall in love with somebody else, and not with yourself in another."

It was just like the minister, thought Claude, to cry *caveat* into his dreams. Heavens! He knew how to love; and visions of the pig-tailed pupils at Mrs. White's rose before him as his horses strained at the hill.

The swale was dusking into night, stars were already aflame over the eastern woods, and the yellow sail of the harvest moon showed above Stonelink. Against the blue-grey stood the red leaves of the hedgerows, with here and there a splash of startling yellow, as if the sunset had been caught on the brambles. The last glow had faded from the west when Claude reached the hill-top village; the street was empty, and the lamps were already set on the cottage supper-tables. It was the pause between dusk

and dark, and the horses' hard clatter on the roadway was like the breaking of a sabbath.

Suddenly the sound of distant music crept towards him through the twilight, first in snatches, wafted by the wind he faced, then more continently, though still depending for *crescendo* and *diminuendo* on the breeze rather than on the player's fingers. At last he reached Miss Kingsley's little cottage, and the wind played no more tricks, for the music crept through her shutters.

He could not see who was playing, nor did he care ; but for a moment he checked his horses. His musical taste was unblushingly vile, but he felt the haunting tenderness of Dvorak's piteous little Humoreske, that flutter of unwilling laughter, as if some broken heart tried to be merry, tried to sing, but could not hide its plaintiveness.

The roses smelled strong in the gathering dark, and he could also smell the wood-fires of the village. Claude's head drooped towards the sorrel's neck. The music stopped, and all was silence except for the wind that blew the night up the street, and paused in the cottage eaves to moan.

CHAPTER X

LINSEED-OIL AND TURPENTINE—AN EVENING CALL—ALL THINGS NEW

THE next morning Claude and his brothers were in the Lower Pen, dosing some calves that had the husk with linseed-oil and turpentine.

"There's that feller Ticehurst just gone into the house," said James, in a breathing-space afforded by the slowness of the lad who was mixing the stuff. "Dora told me as how he was potterin' round the greater part of yesterday afternoon, and he said he was comin' up to see her new separator at work this mornun. Mark my words, boys, he's for spyin' out the land. Hang me if they don't start a regular dairyin' business over at Tanhouse in a month or so."

"I think it's the stock he's after," said Claude. "Dora was feeding those Jersey heifers t'other night, and his head was nearly as deep as theirs in the pail."

"They always was a bumptious lot at Tanhouse—old Ticehurst seems to think as how people's warden's every bit as good as Rector's, and he never come to Communion above twice a year. But they'll be like the frog in the story: they'll bust themselves, they will, for I don't believe as they've made tuppence out of that old farm for the last five year."

"Talking of folk as ain't got tuppence," said Patrick, "that gal Branwell's back from Ireland."

"What! Emily Branwell!" cried Claude.

"Yes, that's her. Jim Harman was telling me last night at the pub. The schoolmistress where she was has gone and died, and all the childer sent home."

"I don't suppose Miss Kingsley 'ull be extra pleased at that."

"She won't, surelye! The gal cost her nothing over in Ireland, and was making something like five bob a week beside."

"She'll send her out as a governess, I reckon," said James. "Here, boy, hurry up with that there physic, or we'll have to find somethin' as 'ull help you go quicker."

The next moment Claude had a struggling calf's head under his oxter, and any conjectures, verbal or mental, he might have liked to make were indefinitely postponed.

On the way back to the farmstead, however, he had time to think over the news, and to realize that it would be good to see Emily again. He wondered if she had altered much. Now that the memory of Nellie Bennett and her successors had grown dim, he found himself dwelling half sentimentally on Emily's share in his past; she used to carry herself well—and her hair. . . . He decided to go and see her when he "knocked off" that evening.

At twilight, accordingly, he changed into his Sunday clothes, and set out for Easeham. He had taken elaborate pains with his toilet; he had brushed his coat, blacked his boots, and coaxed Dora into ironing his trousers. As he walked along the Broad Oak road, he passed young Ticehurst, also in his Sunday best. He thought he looked an oaf, and that it was a pity he did not do his courting, or whatever it was, in his everyday clothes.

Miss Kingsley was fortunately out, but Emily was at home, and, strange to say, just as he was being shown into the room where she sat, a mysterious shyness, almost shamefacedness, seized him. But he managed to recover himself before he crossed the threshold, and greeted her with outstretched hand and a cheerful "Good-evening, Emily!"

She was sitting by the window, a pile of holland on her lap. She sprang hurriedly, and, he thought, rather nervously, to her feet, colouring a little as she shook hands.

"Good-evening," she said shyly—she never used to be shy.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? I heard it only by accident this morning. My eye! I had a surprise."

"It was all so sudden. I knew nothing for certain myself till three days ago."

His words had been bantering, but hers were uttered with great seriousness of voice and eye. She was seated again, and the last of the yellow sunset rested on her face, showing, in spite of the ghastly light, features more prepossessing than he had thought to see. They were large, but there was refinement, even delicacy, in their outline. Her figure was slight, almost childish, and was scarcely shown to advantage by her dark-blue cotton dress, covered with hideous white spots; but Claude admired slim women, and she held herself erect as a dart. Her eyes were mysterious as of old, but there was a wistful droop at the corners of her mouth which had not been of old.

"Please sit down," she said, and picked up her sewing. He was not used to seeing her sew, and she did not sew as Dora sewed—drawing her needle quickly in and out of the stuff, every now and then taking a pin from her mouth, or snapping the cotton with her teeth—neither did she hold her needle as Dora held it, with the result that she often pricked her fingers.

"Are you here for long?" he asked, realizing with a twinge of surprise that she was too shy to speak to him of her own accord.

"Till I can get a place. Aunt is going to advertise for me in the *Morning Post*."

"What sort of place?"

"Governess—nursery governess. I'm very fond of children, and I could easily teach them if they weren't too far advanced."

"You've been teaching in Ireland, haven't you?"

"Yes; but I didn't like it."

"Then it's middling hard on you to have to take a post."

"I can't help that. I've my living to get, and it's no use whining."

This was more like the old Emily.

"Besides, I don't suppose it'll be so bad," she continued; "and I'd much rather go out and earn my own living, however hard it was, than stay here."

"Are you sorry to leave Ireland?"

"Yes; I think I am. I was very happy at school."

"Are you still as fond of reading as ever?"

"More, I think. I suppose you're too busy to read much now?"

"It depends on the time of year. My evenings are generally pretty free. You must come for a walk with me some day, Emily, and we'll talk about all the books we've read since we saw each other last."

She seemed to hesitate.

"I—I don't think I shall have much free time. You see, I must make myself some new clothes before I can take a post. Aunt says these clothes are much too childish for a girl of my age."

Claude had vaguely realized that there was something wrong with Emily's dress besides the spots. Now he understood that it was such as a child of fifteen might have worn, suitable enough to her slight figure, but almost ridiculous when one looked at her coiled-up hair.

"I wish I could sew decently," she said, with a sigh. "You see, I did very little of that sort of thing at school. Miss Sullivan used to mend the younger children's things, and the older ones always did their own. Do you think it's unwomanly, not being able to sew?"

"I don't believe I ever thought about it. I've somehow always had an idea that all women could sew."

"As all ducks can swim."

"Yes; most fellers think that. You see, I never met a woman who couldn't. But it's quite a nice change to find one who——"

"Don't," said Emily sternly. "It isn't a nice change, and I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Well," stammered Claude, seeing that she was resolved to spare neither herself nor him, "you can do what's better than sewing, can't you, now?"

"I don't know about that. Aunt Ethel says it would have been much better if, instead of having learned to play Chopin and Dvorak, I'd learned to herring-bone decently or make a rice pudding.'

"Anyone can make a pudding, but it ain't everyone who can play tunes. Em, was it you playing last night?"

"Yes, at about this time. Did you hear me?"

"I spent nearly ten minutes listening to you. It was first-class."

"I—I'm so glad you liked it."

The clumsy compliment seemed to make her feel awkward and nervous. She took it like one of the school-girls she had just left. He saw her embarrassment, and tried, even more clumsily, to relieve it.

"Won't you play something to me now?"

"Oh no—oh no; I couldn't."

"Do, Em."

She hesitated and flushed deeply.

"I—I can't; I'm out of practice."

Her shyness and reluctance were so great that he forebore to press her, and, realizing that perhaps he had stayed too long, he rose to take his leave.

"I hope I'll soon see you again," he said, as they shook hands; then, moved by a sudden impulse, added: "Am I like what you expected?"

She coloured more deeply than ever.

"No; not very."

Claude was hardly in the best of humours when he reached home that night. The meeting, he felt, had not been a success. He was disappointed in Emily. He called her childish. In many ways she was the old true, stern-souled Emily, with her stoical endurance and royal

truthfulness ; but her shy, deferential manner, her stutter, and her blushes, were new to him, and unwelcome. As for himself, in what ways had he altered ? Physically, he felt he had improved. He surveyed as much of his person as possible in he little cracked glass above his wash-stand. He was not ill-looking. The sun had becomingly swarthied the sallowness of brow and cheek, and the lashes over his black eyes were long and soft as a woman's. His mouth was much too large—he had realized this before, for it had been known at school as " the letter-box," and during various rags more than one missive had been posted in it. His figure was tall and shapely, though with a hint of future stoutness. As he tumbled into bed, and saw the firm, full outlines of his limbs under the sheet, which that hot night was their only covering, it struck him that Emily might have given a more enthusiastic welcome to so splendid an animal.

But he bore Emily no ill-will. Not he ! Indeed, what mental activity he had time for during the next day was devoted to planning future meetings. If one fancied a girl at a neighbouring farm, the right thing to do was to ask her out for walks of an evening ; but Claude realized that this would not be correct procedure in Emily's case. He did not want to call often at Miss Kingsley's cottage, for he knew that she was inclined to be haughty where he and his brothers were concerned ; still, it seemed the only course to take, and he soon reappeared in the Cackle Street, armed against chills by the warmth of returning affection for a boyhood's friend.

Emily's shyness and awkwardness had to a great extent worn off. She herself offered to play to him, and though a sudden nervousness brought Schubert's " Moment Musical " to an untimely end at the eighth bar, she managed to give him the first movement of the " Kreutzer Sonata " without any discords startling enough to reach his ear. She sang, too, some little Irish airs ; he had a slight Irish accent. Her voice had neither much sweetness nor much depth—indeed, it sometimes came perilously

near a wail—but it suited the songs she chose—ballads with tears in their simplicity. Then, completely forgetting both herself and him, she wandered from song back to sonata, and from sonata back to song, till young Shepherd began to feel bored, and rose to take his leave.

He came again a few evenings later, and, meeting her in the lanes on more than one occasion, walked with her to wherever she was bound for, or gave her a lift in his trap. He liked her company, though the sense of disappointment had not yet worn off. As he came to know her better, he saw an Emily materially the same as the girl with whom he had sat in the plum-tree at the Church Cottage and gathered sticks at Doucegrove. It was, perhaps, to this very lack of change that his disappointment was due. She was the Emily he had always known, whereas his life and work had shaken him out of a good many of his boyhood's characteristics. Claude chose to regard himself as a man of experience ; but Emily, it was evident, had little knowledge of life beyond the rather hysterical fragment one finds in a girls' school, and the delusively artistic and balanced picture one finds in a novel. With a broader training of her girlhood's qualities she might have grown into one of those women to whom men turn, nothing doubting, when their brothers fail them. As matters stood, she was no more than a heroic child, strong in her sense of right and princely in her innocence, but lacking both the breadth of knowledge and the depth of experience.

Poor Emily ! She herself had no idea of the grudge she owed those who, by shutting her up in a close atmosphere during her most expansive years, had robbed her of her heritage. Claude pitied her from the heights of his worldly wisdom. As a boy, he had looked on her as mentally stronger than he, even as physically she was taller, and at first it seemed as strange and anomalous to look down on her point of view as on her dark head, which scarcely reached his shoulder. Gradually, however, he became accustomed to his position of guide and philosopher, and began, moreover, to find it both gratifying and

stimulating. He made plans for lending her books and generally enlightening her with his conversation. At Spell Land his " ideas " were mercilessly derided, and it was good to have one who listened in deferential silence to his views on life and morals, and did not greet his confidences with " Gammon ! That's all my eye ! "

CHAPTER XI

AN UNEXPECTED CHAMPION—LIONS AND TIGERS—HABITS AND PASTIMES—A MAGNANIMOUS RESOLUTION

MISS KINGSLEY hardly fathomed the full deeps of the friendship between young Shepherd and Emily Branwell. She occasionally bemoaned the fact that a connection between the two houses should have been re-established, just when they were drifting so comfortably apart; but, she reflected, Emily would soon be gone, and the connection broken. Moreover, on her making some objection to a recent visit of Claude's in Oliver Mills's hearing, he had unexpectedly flung the ballast of his opinion on to Shepherd's end of the scale.

"Keep cool, Aunt Ethel. Shepherd was deuced thick with Em when they were kids, and you can't expect her to drop him like a hot potato now."

If Miss Kingsley had realized the full extent of the friendship, it is doubtful whether even Oliver could have induced her to sanction it; but she was so much oftener in other people's homes than her own that she did not realize how frequently Claude and Emily met, nor how they loved meeting. She took little interest in her brother-in-law's waif, her one concern being to see the girl started in life, which proved more difficult than she had at first imagined.

Day after day the same economically worded advertisement appeared in the *Morning Post:*

"Lady by birth desires situation as Nursery Governess. £18–20. Piano, French, Elementary Latin."

Emily had a good many answers, but nothing was suitable—or, rather, she suited nobody. She was a poor

needlewoman, and most ladies seemed to think needlecraft an essential qualification for her post ; while others, who followed negotiations that had till then been satisfactory with a personal interview, were repulsed by her manner, never cordial, and stiffened by shyness to such a pitch of reserve that one could hardly blame a mother for deciding not to trust her children to so sullen and awkward a creature.

Emily felt this bitterly, for Miss Kingsley took no great pains to conceal her annoyance ; besides, the child's proud spirit shrank from eating the bread of others. She would often groan over her incapability to Claude.

" I might go up for a course at Pitman's if aunt could afford it, but she can't When I was at school I was a fool not to teach myself. I might have known what was bound to happen. I've sometimes thought I might explain to aunt that I'd really cost her much less if she paid for my training in some regular profession. She says there ought to be no difficulty about my getting a place as nursery governess, and I dare say it's all my fault ; still, I can't help thinking—— But it's cowardly to whine."

Their conversations were not always so doleful. They generally talked about books, or about the music which Emily played, and Claude, in his dreamier moments, loved to hear. One of the differences between his discussions with Emily and those he occasionally had with David Gilmour was that the former were invariably objective, while the latter were mostly subjective and abstract. Another was that Emily never grew enthusiastic—she was desperately sincere, but whereas Gilmour's eyes would flash and his cheeks burn while he argued out some point of character or conduct, Emily would relieve her soul only by a few pertinent remarks, becoming more and more reserved the more violently her argument was opposed, so that Claude knew when their differences were at the poles, not by a burst of apologetics or condemnation, but by the absolute silence of his adversary.

Her reading had not followed the same course as his;

her tastes were subtler. He was surprised to find that she had read and enjoyed books which he had always neglected as "dull" or "too solid"—Gibbon's *Roman Empire*, Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. She read sterner stuff than he.

"Do you still love Borrow as much as ever?" she asked him one day; and he was obliged to confess that he had not read him since his head and hand had touched hers over *Lavengro*.

"I'd no idea it was so long since I read anything of his. You see, after Doucegrove, I sort of couldn't bear . . . and there's always been so much to read and so little time to read it in."

Emily was silent.

"Do you remember Doucegrove?" said Claude. "Weren't we fools?"

The untoward result of Oliver Mills's Christmas leave, unwillingly spent at Easeham, was a free-will offering of himself at Easter. Miss Kingsley was surprised to see so sudden a regard for home-ties born in his vagabond affections, but Claude Shepherd guessed the reason, and an old fiery pain from out of the past sprang at him and burned him once more. He was consumed by half-explained emotions of disappointment and annoyance to see Emily so readily slipping back into friendship with her cousin. Her affection for him seemed inconsistent with her nature, and Claude could not bear to suspect inconsistency in Emily.

Oliver received her love with less indifference than he received Miss Kingsley's. He was undoubtedly fond of his aunt, but it was the selfish, unpractical affection that a spoilt child shows an indulgent parent. He wrote to her with the most provoking irregularity, though he knew that his letters were one of the few genuine pleasures of her life, and allowed her to know little or nothing of his private affairs, except when her bank-book was required to unravel their tangle. Emily, however, he treated with a fair

amount of consideration. He was pleased with her physical improvement, and felt the lure of her mental steadfastness.

"She's a game littie piece," he said to Claude one day, calling at Spell Land about a spaniel pup. "True blue, that's what she is. And, on the whole, I think she's pretty —at any rate, she's turned out much better than I expected. No one can say her face isn't uncommon, and she's a good mover. I'd rather have a woman who's a good mover than one with pretty curls and complexion and all that. What sort of women do you like best?"

"I don't know that I've ever thought."

"That's odd. A fellow like you——"

"You see, I've never met Maisie," said Claude, with what was meant for archness.

"Maisie? Oh, May Howell! I wasn't thinking about her. I haven't seen anything of her for ages."

"I thought you were——"

"I don't see why you should. I was only fooling a bit. I don't care for that sort of woman really. I like one a bit older, and with more in her, and all that. I say, Claude——"

"What?"

"Have you ever realized what lions and tigers you've got inside you sometimes?"

"You mean——"

"Yes, you know what I mean. That's what I call experience—hearing 'em roar."

Claude, like every healthy young human, had heard 'em roar more than once, but somehow Oliver's words angered him.

"You'd better take care what you do," he muttered, "and as for a woman that has more in her and all that, take care how you chuck her over. She mayn't take it so quietly as Maisie."

Oliver glared at him, and immediately turned to negotiations about the puppy.

Claude liked him less than ever. His fickleness was

becoming dangerous as well as wanton. He wondered how Emily, with her stern loyalty, could care for him. He put it down to a fact he was just beginning to realize—that women generally were " queer." He did not fear for her, for he considered her to be in much the same position as a sister—to be temporarily neglected, perhaps, like his aunt, but not liable to the abandonment that would probably have otherwise been her fate. The women Oliver met up in town were like the pastimes which as a boy he had dismissed after five minutes' enthusiasm with, " I say, this is beastly rot ! " But Emily and Miss Kingsley were not so much pastimes as habits, which one could dispense with temporarily, no doubt, but to which one was bound sooner or later to return if one wished for comfort.

Besides, Claude was obliged to admit that neither Miss Kingsley nor Emily loved the boy entirely without rhyme or reason. He was handsome and high-spirited, had an uncertain generosity and a certain charm. Besides, he had talent. One evening, as Shepherd passed the Cackle Street cottage with a load of field-bean for Platnix Farm, Emily ran out with a long roll of paper in her hand.

" What's that for ? " he asked.

" Look ! " and Emily spread the sheet before his eyes, while her breath came hot and fast against his neck.

It was a wash drawing, torn from an illustrated paper, and entitled, " A Popular Idol. Crowd waiting at Stage-Door of the Lyceum Theatre to see Mr. Henry Irving." It was boldly signed, " O. Mills."

" My eye ! " exclaimed Claude.

" Isn't it splendid ! " said Emily. " He never told us anything about it till this morning, when he sent us the *Graphic*. He's written to me, too, and says that he means to get on the staff of one of the illustrated papers. I don't see why he shouldn't some day. This sketch is first-class, isn't it ? "

" I don't know anything about pictures," said Claude gruffly ; " but if Oliver chucks up his work for that sort of thing, he's a fool."

A troubled look came into Emily's eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't pitch into him behind his back."

"I'd tell him the same to his face."

The troubled look increased.

"How is it that you're so fond of him, Em?"

She turned on him almost fiercely.

"It was always the same; you were always jealous. You could never understand. He has faults, I know—don't think I can't see 'em—but if we never loved people who had faults, whom the dickens should we love?"

He saw that he had been abominably rude, and tried to atone by humble apology and various eager questions about the art of illustration. Emily answered him gaily enough, but the troubled look was still in her eyes, and between each of her answers and his next question would be an awkward silence. She seemed unable to bear the thought of any ill-will between him and Oliver.

As he walked on in the misty swale he realized what a place Emily had come to fill in his life. No one else could have filled it. Mr. Gilmour was more of a monitor than a comrade, and not always too patient. His school friendships had been unable to survive a parting of the ways, and the farmers' sons with whom he occasionally played the fool were unable to provide a Jonathan for a David who was hard to please and not invariably pleasing.

Emily seemed exactly to fulfil his needs. True, his old attitude of humble deference was gone, but once the shock of the change—or, rather, lack of change—in her had died, he found something splendidly bracing and alluring in her stern, pure heart. Besides, thought he, she had improved wonderfully since her return to Easeham. She seemed to have put away some of her childishness, with her childish dress. No doubt their discussions, to which he had sought to add a tonic of worldly wisdom, had opened her eyes and added a cubit to her mental stature.

Poor Emily! Dear Emily! It occurred to him that evening that he might do worse than marry Emily. At

present he was too young to marry, and hardly in a position to support a wife ; but the day would come when he should have to follow in the footsteps of most men he knew, and think of marriage and the begetting of children. Then he certainly might do worse than marry Emily. Dear Emily ! Poor Emily !

CHAPTER XII

"MENSIS MIRABILIS"—CLAUDE'S NAME IS PAINTED ON A BLUE WAGGON—A GOOD ADVERTISEMENT FOR ALLSOPP—OVER A MILK-PAIL

IMMEDIATELY after Claude's twenty-first birthday various events took place, which, although not on record even in the local papers, he considered epoch-making in his life. To begin with, he became part-owner of Spell Land, and had his first draught of independence and fraternal regard. The former, after he had blown off the froth, proved indifferent ale. He realized that his position was due solely to his brothers' generosity, no provision having been made for him by his father, who had preferred to entrust his future to those who could with some certainty foretell its course. Also, as the partnership, being purely informal, existed more or less at his brothers' pleasure, any attempt of his young ambition to snatch the reins of government and drive along suspected paths of enterprise would lead to its instant dissolution.

Nevertheless, it was good to have a voice in the management of the farm, a share in its scanty profits, and last, but not least, his initial painted on the name-board of the blue waggons that carried the fame of J. and P. Shepherd into the darkness of surrounding hamlets. James made him feel quite a capitalist, with his long arguments about "£ s. d.," and the boy in him rejoiced at the thought of equality with the brothers who had tyrannized, not unwisely, over his submissive childhood. So his name was painted on the blue waggons, and he drove with James in the gig to Robertsbridge Market and Northiam Fair, and

poked fat sheep in the side, and looked into colts' mouths ; told Dora that the poultry should have more sharps in their Molassine ; ordered Blackman and Dawes about ; quarrelled with Patrick over a new sheep-wash ; and corrected James's hop estimates without being thrashed for his impudence.

Another of these unchronicled events was in the nature of an antidote to this poisonous dose of power in little things. Emily Branwell, to whom he would have most enjoyed displaying his greatness, found a post in Kensington, and left Easeham at the beginning of May. Of course, he wrote to her, and told her of his rise in life ; but the bald facts of the case, narrated with the modesty which convention enforces even on one who has his initials painted on a blue waggon, could never have impressed her so much as the sight of him driving Soda in the gig, nodding familiarly to the great ones of the soil, and condescendingly to those who had not the enterprise to own the acres they farmed. Lord, how he would dash past Miss Kingsley's pitiable cottage ! Still, he was glad for Emily's sake that her lot had changed at last. She was now independent, a bread-winner under fairly tolerable circumstances, though her post was not without its drawbacks, judging from the reticence of her letters, reticence being Emily's only way of chronicling the unpleasant.

The third event seemed on the face of it less epoch-making ; none the less, it was a milestone. One evening, returning from Rye Fair, Claude found Patrick drunk. He had not been drunk since the days when intoxication was to him, as it was now to Oliver Mills, the badge of man's estate. Even then, according to James, the outbreaks had not been serious, for Patrick's heart was set on women rather than wine. He had always drunk a great deal, but he could carry a great deal, and it must have been a regular carouse that had laid him, as his brother found him, on the dairy flagstones.

Dora was in the milking-shed, and James at Meadow Land, so Claude was alone in authority. He never thought

for a moment that Patrick was drunk. He made sure it was apoplexy—Pat had grown rather stout of late—and rushing to the barns, sent a man off for the doctor, who was visiting at Brede Green.

The doctor arrived in due course, lifted Patrick's eyelid, smelled his breath, and suddenly became contemptuous, not only of Patrick, but of Claude and the sobbing Dora. After his laconic " Drunk ! " they expected him to go, but to their surprise he proceeded to measures worthy of apoplexy itself. He ordered Pat to bed, and then insisted on administering an emetic. His behaviour was a great puzzle to Dora and Claude, for not only did he treat medically a condition which they considered of purely ethical importance, and no more to be nursed and physicked than a fit of temper, but he looked upon Patrick just as if he were an ordinary toper, kicked out of some low public-house at closing-time, whereas his family all judged him by a standard of morality made specially to his measure, and considered the doctor's disgust as brutal and as out of place as his tumblerful of mustard and water.

Pat's account of his adventures prior to when Claude took up their tale was not so graphic as it might have been, owing to the remissness of his memory, which could furnish him only with a series of disjointed and rather irrelevant happenings, all of them by no means bearing the hall-mark of veracity, to which his listeners' knowledge of his character had to supply connection and correction. They knew that he had lately been associating with what James thought very low company—indeed, his taste in the way of company had always been deplorable—and it appeared that some of his boon companions had deserted the cleanly respectability of the Broad Oak Inn, with its " Teas Provided for Cyclists " and bowling-green, for a certain tavern known as the Fuggle Hop Beerhouse, where one was not hampered by the proximity of tea-drinking young ladies or of patriarchs aiming slowly at the jack. It happened, however, that at the beerhouse one relinquished Allsopp's for an inferior brewage, and the six pints

which Patrick could so easily carry out of the Broad Oak necessitated his being carried out of the Fuggle Hop. He was driven home by one of his low companions, tenant of a piteous small-holding at Horn's Cross, and had partially recovered by the time he reached Spell Land—recovered enough, at any rate, to realize that he was damn thirsty. He proceeded to quench his thirst with sherry, and finding that it made him feel ill, he managed to stagger into the dairy, whether in hope of getting cool or of finding a helpful and sympathetic maid he himself was not sure.

After that he was watched carefully. If he became known as a drunkard, the reputation of the farm might suffer. Even now it was doubtful whether the servants knew the truth or believed the lie that had at last been found to suit James's conscience. His family did not abuse him ; on the contrary, they were extremely kind, for he was a pitiable object all the next day, owing both to the beer and to the emetic. The latter he considered a most unfair advantage to have taken of his helpless condition.

Patrick's outburst, brief as it was, subtly changed life at Spell Land. James, Claude, and Dora woke up to the fact that even though he was Patrick, and therefore not to be expected to live up to ordinary standards of respectability, his better behaviour was desirable in the interests of the family and the farm. He still persisted in the " low company " that was responsible for his degradation, and they were powerless to restrain him, for though his attempts at deceit were canine in their transparency, he was a man of will and of muscle. However, another event was at hand, beside which Pat's escapade shrank into insignificance—an event which broke the sequence of obscurity, for it at last found its way into the local papers.

As Claude crossed the yard one evening, he found Dora feeding some calves outside the Dutch barn. He was very fond of Dora, though his affection in May was not what it had been in April, when J. and P. were the only initials on the waggon-board. Then he had stood alone in submission

and opposition to those three—Patrick, James, and Dora; now James and Patrick were his equals and Dora his inferior. She tacitly accepted this position; not that she gave him the honour he considered due, but she at once began to treat him as her elder brothers' equal, with a right to criticize and command, and to look upon her as an instrument of Providence specially designed for the satisfaction of his bodily needs.

Claude went up to her as she stooped over the milk-pail, and looked knowingly at the calves.

"This little feller 'ull soon be old enough for veal," he remarked, passing his hands over Poppy's bull-calf.

Dora was silent.

"We ought to get a good price for him, I reckon."

Still silent, and suddenly a tear splashed into the milk.

"Good heavens, Dora!"

Such sentiment seemed to him misplaced and maudlin. Why should Dora, so late in her experience of calves, suddenly realize the pathos of their untimely slaughter?

"Diana's due to calve in three weeks, so you'll soon have something to help you forget this lad."

"Lord bless you," cried Dora, "it ain't the calves!"

"Then whatever is it?"

A tear fell on the calf's nose.

"I'm going to be married," she said weakly.

Her brother's jaw fell, and he gaped at her like an idiot.

"I'm going to be married."

"Dora!"

"Well, why shouldn't I? Women sometimes get married, don't they?'

"But not at your age."

"I like your cheek! How old do you take me for, young man? Have you never known a woman marry at thirty-seven?"

Yes; but somehow he had never credited Dora with passions more romantic than a cat's affection for a good home, nor ambitions soaring higher than a first prize for her cheeses.

"Who's the man?" he stammered.

"Bert Ticehurst."

"Dora . . . how can you? . . . I never . . ."

"I think you might have noticed he was sweet on me," said Dora, with something between a sniff and a simper.

"I've noticed him about here a great deal, but I'd no idea it was you he came to see. I thought he was spying after the stock. James thought he was keen on your new separator."

"The separator! the stock! That's just like you men; you can't see a brick wall till you've cracked your skulls on it! I never met your match! Any sensible woman would have found out what was up weeks ago. You bet, all the girls have a pretty good idea of it."

"But he's much younger than you," Claude muttered lamely.

"Only six years."

"And he's never done a decent stroke of work in his life."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what they're all like down at Tanhouse, and he's the worst of 'em."

"How is it that they've got on so well, then?"

"They haven't got on well. They don't make three-ha'pence out of that old farm, and all the Chitcombe end of their land is mortgaged. I know there's a lot of show, and they're trying to spy out our methods, because they think that'll mean less trouble." Claude had quite adopted his brothers' view of the Ticehurst family.

"James and Pat 'ull be furious," he continued.

"I know that," said Dora, "and that's just why I thought I'd tell you first. I thought you'd be nice. But I might have saved my breath; you're as bad as the others."

She was sobbing bitterly now, her tears running off her cheeks into the pail. Claude's heart melted at the sight of her. Poor Dora! He stole his arm round her waist, and put his cheek to hers.

" I'm so sorry ! " he whispered.

" Oh, it's all right," she sobbed. " Of course, I know you all hate Bert. I suppose you can't help it, any more than I can help loving him. Get out, you greedy beast ! " And she cuffed the bull-calf's head out of the pail.

" Don't cry any more, Dora." And he kissed her.

" I—I can't help it. Please let my arm free, Claudie. Lily's not old enough to drink without my hand."

Her arm and Lily's nose disappeared simultaneously into the milk, and for a moment her low sobs were drowned in the sneezing and choking of the calf, too transported at first to take due measures for respiration.

" He'll make you work precious hard," said Claude, after a pause.

" I couldn't work harder than here."

" Oh, couldn't you ! Besides, surely you'd rather work for us than for those Ticehursts ? "

" I'll be working for Bert."

" And for all the others, too, you see if you ain't. Besides, Bert . . . he's not always been straight . . ."

" I know that ; but most young fellers go a bit crooked just at start. He's all right now."

" He's not much to boast of. I don't see how you can love him, Dora."

She began to sob again.

" You don't understand. I know he might be better, but there's no one just like him, somehow. I want him dreadfully—that's just how I feel—I want him."

Dora's reasoning seemed to Claude most inadequate, but he felt a brute to have made her cry so much. Once more he put his arm round her waist. She had outgrown her anæmia, and in its place had come a look of almost refined fragility. The skin of her forearm, rising out of the milk, was white, and the curves shapely. The brown, toil-roughened hand was hidden in the milk and Lily's mouth.

" You might take my part when I tell James," she murmured.

" All right, old girl ; I will."

" That's nice of you, Claude. Somehow, I was sure you'd be nicer than the others. You used to be such a dear little chap. I always thought so, even though I had to whip you."

Her reminiscences struck him as indelicate, but he did not take away his arm. They stooped together over the milk, their nostrils full of the rich, almost sickening smell of it, till strange suckings and gurglings announced that Lily was swallowing her heel-taps. Then Dora jerked away the pail, and stood upright. James had just come into the yard, and was calling her.

" Not a word ! " she whispered.

Not a word was said that evening, but many words and high words were the result of her confession to her elder brothers the next morning. Claude's promise to take her part proved no light yoke. The bare idea of her marriage seemed utterly preposterous to Patrick and James. Besides, she was to marry a Ticehurst, one of the despised and dreaded race. Who knew but that this alliance was a deep-laid scheme of the conspirators at Tanhouse, realizing that there had better be union with Spell Land, since they could not compass its overthrow ?

Claude fought loyally, but Dora's strongest ally was doubtless the fact that her brothers were powerless to prevent the marriage, so came in time to see the reasonableness of submitting to it with a good grace. After all, there was no open breach with the Ticehursts, and the wedding would cause no scandal in the neighbourhood—unless, indeed, James and Patrick refused their blessing. They could easily manage to keep their new connections at a proper distance, and the alliance would not be in the least derogatory to their position as farmers. In fine, the wound would be secret, so could be endured.

Thus Dora carried her point, with tears that did not cease, even after the victory was won. Her lot was not enviable, for her preparations for her marriage—all those dear delights of stitching and whispering—were spoiled by the growling of two—or, rather, it must be confessed, three

—males, preoccupied with conjectures as to who would fill her place and cook their dinner. They could not imagine the farm without her, any more than they could imagine it without the oast or the pond or the ridiculous little garden. The foundations of the earth would be out of course when one ceased to hear her pattens in the yard, or her shrill voice scolding the girls, when one no longer found penny novels propped open on the kitchen-table, bottles of patent medicine on the mantelpiece, or shreds of " dead pink " gingham in the grate. They felt sure that no one would be able to " run " the house as well as Dora. They foresaw storms and badly cooked potatoes.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN OF THE WORLD—A TRAGEDY OF STAPLETON'S—KENSINGTON GARDENS—CUB!

CLAUDE'S life without Emily Branwell was very much like a Greek play without a chorus—it gained, no doubt, in artistic value, but its catastrophes lost some of their momentousness. Besides, he missed her for her own sake. Many mornings he started up from dreams of her, and through the toil of his working-day he carried a set of mind-pictures, all of the same ill-dressed girl.

Later in the year his longing for her became more complex and more troublesome. Emily had an afternoon to herself every week, and in one of her letters she told him that her cousin often met her in the Park or in Kensington Gardens, and occasionally took her out to tea. Claude's heart at once began to ache with the old anguish, of which he had at last learned the ugly name. Not that he looked upon Oliver seriously as a rival, but he could not bear to think of him winning from Emily the friendly words and smiles which she had no right to give anyone but Claude Shepherd.

He was immensely relieved when, at a social evening of the Rat and Sparrow Club, he heard that Mills was engaged to a rich widow, and equally disgusted the next morning when he was told that Miss Kingsley had emphatically contradicted the statement.

It was not a matter for uncertainty, and after some pondering Claude wrote his last letter to young Mills.

The answer was brief, and more cordial than he had expected:

" DEAR SHEPHERD,

" She ain't a widow ; her husband's out somewhere in Mexico. Devil take her ! But I'm rid of her now, thank Heaven ! Fancy an Easeham rumour erring on the side of charity !

" Yours,

" O. MILLS."

Claude guessed that Oliver was trying to dazzle him with his villainy ; the young fool was evidently as proud of his first intrigue as of his first tipple. " Look on me ; I am a man of the world, a man about town ! Wonder and perish, you blameless simpleton, who never was put to bed by the caretaker, or seduced your neighbour's wife." And Claude felt a wound in his vulnerable young pride—" But he shan't go swaggering before Emily "—so he wrote at once a fairly dictatorial letter, bidding her avoid the reprobate.

The answer was the fiercest he had ever had from Emily. Did he expect her to throw over Oliver because a woman had made a fool of him ? Didn't he know that the poor boy had been more sinned against than sinning ? Wasn't he ashamed to hit a man when he was down ? and so on, till " I'm sorry to be such a beast, Claude," gave the writer's sex the victory over her indignation.

For some time Claude had been contemplating a visit to London, but he had been deterred partly by his work and partly by the thwartings of finance. Even successful farming was uncertain, and in spite of the extent and fertility of the Spell Land acres, the profit wrung from them was as small as it was variable. If receipts were good, expenses were proportionately high, and the Shepherds would have thought it as criminal to spend ten shillings on a day's junketing as to drink milk that was not skim, or to eat their own hens' eggs instead of those they bought at

eightpence a dozen from the grocer. That year, above all, there was need for economy, for frit-fly was in the oats, and signs of aphis-blight in two hop-gardens. Patrick, also, was set on buying a hay-elevator, an ambition which had for years necessitated contrivance and self-denial.

However, early in September a happy combination of events not only allowed, but necessitated a visit. Brandy, the trap-horse at Spell Land, had grown too old for his work, and a successor had to be found. James heard that some good working horses were to be put up for sale at Stapleton's Repository, with the prospect of low bidding during the quiet season, and he suggested that he and Claude should take advantage of a cheap excursion to town, and " have a look at 'em." The railway-fare would be only a few shillings, and they would be more likely to get good horseflesh for their money in town than in the country at that time of year.

The matter ended in Claude going up alone, as James and Patrick wished to attend an important auction at Rye. The youngest Shepherd was a good judge of horses, and could be trusted not to spend more than the thirty pounds which had been set aside.

The business of the day was over before one, and Claude left Stapleton's fairly satisfied with himself and the brown gelding that had been knocked down to him. He had made his plans before leaving Spell Land ; the animal was to be at Charing Cross by half-past eight ; meantime he would go to Kensington and see Emily.

Fortune had favoured him ; he need not have spent a sleepless night in wondering how he should get rid of James. How pleased Emily would be ! He would ask her to come out with him and help chose a wedding present for Dora, and he would give her tea in a shop. A little dissipation would be good for her.

So Claude set his face westward. Having been in town once before, he felt a Londoner by adoption, a feeling which was appreciably damaged by an attempt to reach Kensington in a Holborn omnibus. Emily lived in a

square near The Boltons ; he thought the house very big and imposing, and was still more impressed by the manservant who opened the door. Nothing upset his admiring wonder till he caught sight of himself in a mirror in the room into which he had been shown, whereupon vague feelings of disquiet invaded his satisfaction. What was wrong he could not exactly te l, but when he looked round the room and then at himself he was smitten with a sense of the incongruous. Of late, riding-breeches and moccasins had taken the place of Sunday clothes in his idea of fitness ; he wore, besides, a coat of a peculiarly large check, and a huge spotted tie, while the pattern of his waistcoat had perhaps been accountable for the glance of the man who had admitted him. In short, he reeked of Stapleton's.

There was, however, nothing but friendship in Emily's eyes as she greeted him, though a closer observer than Shepherd might have noticed a start in the doorway, for she had not seen him since his promotion to the publicity of a waggon-board had necessitated a more striking colour-scheme in his attire. His manners were easier than six months ago ; he no longer sat on the edge of his chair, he carried himself more erectly, and a truce from the rougher kinds of labour had improved both the skin and the colour of his hands.

She hesitated when he asked her to come out with him. It was not, apparently, so easy as he had thought for a nursery governess to escape from her house of bondage. However, in this respect Emily's lot was better than that of many, her mistress being unusually liberal of outings and free hours ; and, though for that very reason she showed what Claude thought an exaggerated fear of abusing her generosity, she at last agreed to ask if she might go out that afternoon instead of Saturday, hers by contract. Ten minutes later she and Claude were in the Earl's Court Road, and she had raised herself a couple of inches in his estimation by hailing the right omnibus.

They went up on the top, and for the first time since their meeting had a good look at each other. It is to be

doubted whether a prolonged contemplation of Claude's check suit and rakish bowler did much to dissipate Emily's first alarm, but young Shepherd was delighted with his companion. He thought she had gained in beauty and assurance—the former, perhaps, because her veil softened the rather sharp outlines of her face, the latter because she had hailed the right omnibus and knew the fare to the Brompton Oratory. She held herself as upright as ever, and her figure had gained in grace, though not in fulness. She was plainly dressed, but her hat was pretty, and she had puffed out her hair a little at the sides, which made her look younger and less severe.

They did not speak much. Claude asked her various questions about her post, which she answered evasively. Then suddenly she turned to him, and said :

" I'm leaving at the end of next month."

" Lord, Em ! I'm sorry."

" I'm not."

" Aren't you happy, then ? Why are you leaving ? "

" Sacked ! "

" The brutes ! Whatever for ? "

" I didn't suit. I'm not good with children ; I can't keep them quiet, and Mrs. Simmons says I'm harsh to them."

" What a——"

" But it's true. They're not nice children ; they tell tales and they tell lies, and they never will share anything. Of course, it's really rather a good post ; I've such lots of freedom. It isn't every mistress who'd let me come out jaunting like this. But I can't say I'm sorry to leave."

Claude was surprised at her cheerfulness ; he would have thought the loss of her post one of the greatest calamities that could have befallen her, remembering how she had hated the dependence of her aunt's house. But he said nothing, not wishing to banish the half-smile from her lips.

They bought a tea-set for Dora at Harrod's. Emily was most helpful, and doubtless saved the bride from unutter-

able things. Afterwards they had tea, and Emily became more talkative ; her tea was a pretence, but her conversation was entrancing. She and Claude slipped back into the old groove, talking of books, shying at the abstract, she laconic, he dictatorial when his mouth was not full.

When tea was over they still had a couple of hours left, and Emily suggested that they should go back to Kensington and sit in the gardens. The evening was hot, almost sultry, and Claude was glad of the wind that blew dust into his eyes on the High Street omnibus. They stopped opposite the Albert Memorial, which Claude had seen before, but never inspected. However, he realized that Emily, living near, must be familiar with the marvel, so, conquering his desire to climb the steps, he went with her to a seat in the shadow of the trees.

The gardens were very still ; the dusty wind was only for drivers on omnibuses. There was something mellow and gracious in the air and in the sunlight ; sounds came softly and shadows were clear. Claude had never seen London in this melting mood ; the garden might have been some Sussex park, and Kensington Palace some old red-walled manor of the south country.

Emily was tired—he could see it by the way she sat—but he did not think her so pale as formerly. All that afternoon the ill news that she had given him had lurked in the background of his thoughts, ruining their peace. She might not be sorry to lose her post, but he foresaw dark days. Unless she were lucky, she would have to go back to Easeham and eat grudged bread. Had she thought of this ?

Surely not, for the demure, delicious half-smile was still on her lips. His heart gave a sudden throb, for he realized that it might be for him. One slim gloved hand lay palm upwards on her lap, and suddenly his hand closed over it.

She started, and looked at him rather nervously.

" Em, I'm so glad you're not fretting about having lost your post."

" There's no use crying over spilt milk. Besides, as I've told you, I'm pleased to go."

" But won't your aunt—I mean, won't you just about hate——"

" Oh, I'm not going back to Easeham. Only the most awful necessity would drive me to live with Aunt Ethel again."

" Then how are you going to manage ? "

" I shall manage all right."

His hand was still over hers, but hers was now struggling beneath it. Those faint struggles, with the flush of her cheek, and the sweep of her eyelashes against it, plunged him into the madness of his life.

" What if you and I got married, Em ? "

Her hand was free at last. His emotion had weakened his guard.

" What—what do you mean, Claude ? "

" I mean—well, dear, ain't it plain enough ? "

They sat alone in the shadow of dusk and trees. The sun was low and red behind the Palace. Not a soul was in sight, though the voices of children came from the Round Pond.

" I—I can't," said Emily.

The blood rushed to Claude's face, and once more he put his hand over hers.

" Oh, Em, I've always loved you—always—and ever since last autumn I've been wanting to marry you, but I thought I'd wait till we were older. I can't wait, Em. I want to marry you now. I'm in the position to do it. I could keep you in comfort, dear—that is to say, if you don't mind coming to live at Spell Land. Dora's going away——"

" And I could do her work."

There was a foreign dash of bitterness in her tone, and Claude drew back from her, struck with it and with the consciousness that, after all, that was what her marriage would amount to. If he married within the next ten years, his wife would have to work ; anyhow, it was hard to imagine folded hands at Spell Land.

" I can't say that you'll have nothing to do—household things—I—we couldn't afford—I didn't mean to ask you so soon—at least—at least——"

He coloured violently and held his tongue. Emily, too, was silent. Remorseless villain!

" You wouldn't have to work so hard as Dora," he continued, struggling hopelessly to flounder out of his thicket of imbecilities. " I shouldn't let you work, Em—if you'll marry me, I'll slave——"

" My dear Claude, you're badly mistaken if you think I could sit idle while you slaved, or that I should like to go lounging in a busy farmer's house. If I wanted to marry you, I'd work my fingers to the bone and never grumble; but I don't want to marry you. I shan't keep my secret any longer. I'm engaged."

He stared at her, dumb in his dismay.

" Who to? " he stammered at last.

" Oliver," said Emily.

The word was not so much a blow as an electric shock. He half sprang up, then fell back, gripping her arm.

" Oh, Em—you can't—you mustn't, Em——"

" How dare you! "

" Oh, I know I'm forgetting myself, but you've hit me in the wind. I can't understand things. Somehow I never dreamed that you could think of him in that way."

" I know people used to look on us as brother and sister—indeed, up to a few months ago I always thought of him as my brother. But I feel quite different now."

Claude had left hold of her arm, and his chin rested in his hand. He felt calmer than when the blow had first fallen, but also far more wretched.

" I can't understand. Of course, I see now that I was a fool to think you'd never marry, simply because you'd been brought up together. But I can't understand."

" Well, Claude, you and I must thrash this matter out. We're not in the same position as the average man and woman. He asks, and she says ' No,' and if he's wise he

respects her for it—but you and I are friends; we're lovers. . . ."

"Lovers, Em?"

"Yes—don't you know I love you?" The tears were creeping down her cheeks under her veil.

"I don't see how you can."

"Oh, it's hard to explain, and perhaps it's even harder to understand—but I love you—I've always loved you."

"And I've always loved you."

"Oh, Claude, indeed you haven't."

Her words maddened him.

"How dare you say that, Emily? I love you far more than Mills is capable of loving anyone."

"Can you look me in the eyes and say that you didn't forget me while I was at school?"

He had been so smitten with the beauty of the idea that he had loved her from childhood that he had neglected to probe into its truth.

"Yes, you did forget me. You answered hardly any of my letters—you didn't even acknowledge the photograph I sent you. Oh, I know these are only little things, but they count for much."

"I love you now. Won't that do?"

"You love me at this moment, but you didn't love me an hour ago, when we were having tea. Don't interrupt. If you really loved me you wouldn't be always contradicting everything I say—you wouldn't patronize me——"

"I patronize you——"

"But you do. You're always telling me things I know already and laughing at my opinions. Of course, I don't expect you to agree with me in everything just because I'm a woman—that's cant. But I do expect you to treat me with—with courtesy, not as if I were hopelessly your mental inferior. I dare say I am in some ways, but not so much as you seem to think. I'm not a little girl to be taught and dictated to, anyhow. Please forgive me, Claude. I'm saying this only because we're friends."

Claude opened his lips to retort, but found nothing to say.

" It wasn't always like this," continued Emily; " it's since I came back from school. Before I went to school I —I loved you better than Oliver."

" And now, because I'm not so smooth-tongued as you wish, you——"

" No, Claude, I don't want you to be smooth-tongued. I'm not smooth-tongued myself—I'm being abominably rude just now. But I feel that you don't love me as a husband ought to love his wife."

" And does Oliver ? "

" I think he does. Oh, you don't know what a stay he has been to me lately ! When I first came here, and hadn't a friend, he was so good. Almost every Saturday we've been somewhere together, and he has helped me in lots of ways. He's so strong—he takes care of me."

The Stoic in her was sacrificed on the altar of the child.

" I reckon it's very kind of him," sneered Claude, " but he ain't the feller I'd like to see taking care of you, Em. You seem to forget that he has had an intrigue with a married woman."

" How dare you say that ! " cried Emily, flushing crimson. " You forget yourself entirely ! "

" I'm only acting for your good, and he himself told me——"

" He never told you there had been an intrigue. He was infatuated, I own, but never guilty. I believe one of the reasons she threw him over was that he refused . . ."

" He made out to me that he was guilty, though he never said it in so many words ; and even if he ain't, it shows what sort of fellow he must be, to go swaggering about a thing like that."

" You misread his letter. He has told me all the truth. It was his wretchedness at the creature's villainy which first brought us together—in the new way. Oliver has suffered ; he has done wrong, but he has been punished for it, and he and I have both sworn to put the memory of it behind us."

" But he has loved other women, and he may love still others."

" He has never loved a woman as he loves me ; he swears it. I know he's fickle, but he's generous, and he's always been true to me. When we were at school he still thought of me and wrote to me. He never forgot me—never."

" Is he in a position to marry you ? "

" He has his clerk's salary, and he's making first-rate progress at the studio. Besides, even if we're as poor as church mice, haven't I said that for the husband I love I'd work my fingers to the bone and never grumble ? "

" Em, are you quite sure you ain't marrying him to save yourself the misery of going back to your aunt ? "

The question was rude, but it was the first that genuine unselfishness had sent to his lips that evening. Perhaps that was why Emily answered it so gently.

" Quite sure. It was after Mrs. Simons gave me notice that Oliver proposed to me, but I know that pity did not make him ask, or fear influence my answer."

It was getting dark. A star or two shone in the grey sky. The children's voices were hushed at last.

" I must be going," said Emily, " and I think it's time you started for Charing Cross—you're none too early for your train."

" Train be damned ! " said Claude thickly. " Oh, Emily, you're not going to end it all like this ? "

" I want to end nothing. I shall always love you, Claude."

" Don't say that. It ain't true. If you really loved me you wouldn't marry Oliver. You can't love both of us."

" Indeed I can. But I'm in a strange position. I wish I could make myself clear. I've tried so hard to tell how it is that I could never be happy or dutiful as your wife."

" You think I'm conceited and selfish ? "

" Forgive me, Claude."

" And Oliver, I suppose, has no faults ? "

" Oh, don't make me wretched. Of course he has—great ones—but—but——"

" Emily, you're the most illogical person I ever met."

They were both standing, she less deep in the shadow than he. She was trembling violently, and her fingers were twisting a little handkerchief.

" I—I really must go," she said, " and so must you."

He held out his hand.

" Won't you kiss me, Claude ? " and she lifted her veil.

" No, Emily—I can't—I daren't."

She pulled down her veil, twisting it under her chin, and began to move away.

" Don't wait any longer ; you'll miss your train, you really will. Take a blue bus at the Memorial, and don't forget to buy some sandwiches at the station, for I don't suppose you'll be home much before midnight."

He turned from her in fury. Why were women so fond of bathos ?

The fury was with him as he drove under the clear stars to Charing Cross ; it was stronger than ever as he got into the 8.57 (without his sandwiches), and it haunted the first part of the doze into which he fell after the train had left Orpington. Then suddenly, out of the fogs of sleep, Emily's face came before him, and she lifted her veil, just as she had lifted it for the kiss he had refused. He woke up, shivering in body, and humble in spirit. The fury was dead, and in its place reigned a cold, heavy sorrow.

He left the train at Battle, and set out for Spell Land, leading the horse in which he no longer took any interest or pride. The trees and hedges rose out of the sea of white mist that flooded the fields, and there was mist among the stars, floating in solemn shrouds. The curse of the night was upon him, intensifying emotion as well as scent and sound. Even bitterer than his sorrow was his shame, which, from the faintest heart-prick, grew, as he walked, to the fiercest thrust. Sorrow alone he could have borne, for sorrow meant self-pity, and he loved self-pity, but shame made him sick, and sent him shrinking even from the brute he led.

Emily had made him ashamed of himself. In perfect sincerity, in perfect love, she had held up a mirror before his eyes, and he had seen—a cub. His cheeks were hot as he thought of the last year. He had domineered over Emily, he had patronized her, he had laughed at her small experience. After all, what was his own experience worth? Owing partly to his farm duties, and partly to Patrick's conversation, he was acquainted with the laws of sex, and he had some knowledge of a few of the coarser vices. That was all. He had seen love and hate and jealousy—indeed, all the emotions that all men see—and he had thought that was everything. He had been like a child on his first visit to the market town, who thinks that London itself cannot be larger, noisier, or more full of people.

Man is not, however, a disinterested animal, and Claude kicked himself most violently when he thought of all he had lost. He felt almost sure that, but for his self-absorption and conceit, Emily's promise would now be his instead of Oliver's. She was of better social standing than he, but he came of sound yeoman stock, and in ordinary circumstances a lonely little nursery governess would not think it beneath her to mate with a young farmer of good prospects and some education. There was absolutely no doubt that before his schooldays she had preferred him to her cousin. Since then, however, he had weakened his position, and Oliver had strengthened his. Claude still considered Emily's love for Mills illogical, a disturbing inconsistency in a character he had thought true steel. But after all, Emily was a woman, just like Dora, and he supposed that "somehow she wanted him." His faults Claude considered much more glaring than his own, but they were certainly less objectionable. They had about them the glamour of a youthful and adventurous spirit; moreover, he was not blind to them, and came to Emily for sympathy and forgiveness, whereas Claude to that moment would have been blind if she had not been true and resolute enough to open his eyes. Oliver had suffered for his sins, too, and Claude was only just beginning to pay the penalty of his.

Again—and here he had another glimpse of the woman in Emily—Oliver's faults had not wounded her pride.

After all, it seemed natural enough that she should marry Oliver, since she did not wish to marry Claude. When he traced the chain of events, from the first meeting to what he swore should be the final parting, he saw that her choice had seemed bound to fall on one of her comrades, and he had lost the game through his own folly. How wonderfully she had always loved them both! Sooner or later the call of sex was bound to intensify the relations of two of the three. They had not really been as brothers and sister; there had from the first been something lover-like in their attitude. He remembered how he had kissed her at Doucegrove.

His surprise at circumstances was fast fading, but Fate was adding a fresh drug to the medicine she had prepared for her refractory child, bitterer because purer than any she had yet stirred into the cup. Would Emily be happy in her choice? He could now account for it, but could he call it wise? Oliver might have been faithful to her had they remained in their old relationship, had she still been one of the "habits" of his life; but now these things were changed, and Emily was in the class of "pastimes," to be dismissed, perhaps, with "I say, this is rot," before the hazard of their married life was half played out. What had gone to make her love? Some memories of childhood, some pity, some gratitude, some shrinking from the struggling monotony of the future, the riotous attraction of sex. What, again—a still more terrible question—had gone to make Mills's? He was undoubtedly fond of Emily, undoubtedly charmed by her, but at the same time Claude could not help suspecting that there was more of reaction than necessity in his offer of marriage. He had just been disappointed, disgusted, by another woman, the antithesis of Emily in her treachery, consciencelessness, and worldliness: it was perfectly natural that in his mingled disillusion and self-loathing he should turn to the pure child who had always stood for what was best and truest in his life.

These thoughts did not become articulate in Shepherd; he was not master enough of deduction to do more than follow a vague chaotic course of mental wandering. The result, however, could not have been more definite. He came miserably to the conclusion that Emily's bread of life had had the salt left out of it, and might be found corrupt in famine time.

CHAPTER XIV

A DISAPPOINTED MAN—DORA'S WEDDING AND ANOTHER'S—EVERY WOMAN'S SCRAPE

THE next morning Claude had a letter, which, as he recognized the rather childish handwriting, he did not open till he was alone. Vague, half-acknowledged hopes stirred him, but Emily said nothing to lighten his heart. She remembered that she had not told him her engagement was a secret. She and Oliver meant to tell no one till after their marriage. Her aunt would be horrified if she knew, for she expected Oliver to rise in his profession and make a rich marriage. Would Claude be so kind as to say nothing of the matter? She, Emily, herself thought it much better to "tell things straight out," but Oliver declared silence necessary, so she asked for Claude's. He thought it tactless of her to mention Oliver in that connection.

He crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the fire; something in it touched him dangerously—its simplicity, its naïve friendliness, atoned for the current of infatuation that ran through it. Emily evidently did not want their old relationship to be disturbed; in fact, she seemed short-sighted enough to think that it could remain as before. He smiled bitterly. He felt tired and old that morning, partly because of insufficient sleep, and partly because of reaction. Ten hours ago he had despised himself as a cub, but that morning he told himself that the days of conceit and puppydom were over, and that he was now embarking on the future of a Disappointed Man. He felt cynical and misanthropical already, and these emotions supplanted the

riding-breeches, cigars, and swagger which he had hitherto looked on as the insignia of man's estate; they were restoring his self-admiration. After all, his anguish had given him new dignity, both social and human. He felt on a level with the heroes of poetry and tragedy, all those romantic misanthropic wearers of willow.

But at the bottom of his heart lay a different set of emotions, the same that had tormented him on his walk under the stars. Before that sorry hour in Kensington Gardens his love had been an easy-going passion, sure of its desire, but disappointment, coupled with self-realization, had whipped it into something altogether more noble and more wretched. He wished that he had never spoken; the whole episode had been unedifying, and had left a bad taste in his mouth. He felt that his blundering proposal had lowered him in Emily's eyes, which saw him none too great to start with. It had been too early as well as too late, for its acceptance would have involved a life to which he had no right to call her. He thought of Emily at Spell Land, in the midst of all the coarseness and pettiness, the stress and jar, which even he, with his thicker skin, sometimes found hard to bear. Because she would have borne them stoically was a poor reason for laying them on her back. But his longing had run away with him, and, after dragging him through brambles which had stripped him of his coat of many colours, had flung him in the ditch, both naked and ashamed.

Dora's wedding took place early in October, and was an event of some importance in the Easeham year. The local paper spoke enthusiastically of the " bond of union established between two of the most important farms in the Rape of Hastings "—quite forgetting that the Tanhouse land was mortgaged. Indeed, the general idea seemed to be that the marriage was a brilliant stroke of diplomacy, and, if there was one thing which would have driven James to an open expression of his disgust, it was the " Not a bad job for you, old feller " of his neighbours.

There were one or two, however, who guessed that there

was " humble pie in the business," and by the time the marriage took place the number of these had been increased by the attitude James was politic enough to adopt—one of " Well, well," and " Ticehurst's doin' better than he used." The reason why the whole parish did not come to believe that James was a self-immolated victim on the altar of true love was doubtless that the parish as a whole discredited the idea of true love in a woman of thirty-seven. Besides, Bert Ticehurst complicated the matter—a creature who, though he would work on occasions, spent his days chiefly in loafing ; who, though he was generally sober, was liable to " bursts " ; who, though he was in the main good-tempered, was not incapable of assault ; who, though he had kept steady for the last couple of years, had a cloud of rather sordid wrong-doing obscuring his past. One would not have suspected the most desperate marriage-seeker of a day's infatuation for him, and Dora was a woman of discretion, with a host of married friends, and therefore a third party's experience of the thorns that run through a woman's feet when she no longer walks single in the way. One could not blame anybody for discrediting the fact that was daily apparent to Claude—that Dora loved this unromantic ne'er-do-well with all her heart, and, though not cherishing a single delusion about him, was longing to give up for his sake what rags of freedom she still wore. Her brother showed his pity for her, but she wanted none of it ; she had made her bed abominably, but she would not have to lie on it alone.

Dora considered herself too old to be married in white, so her favourite shade of pink was allowed to contrast with her pale cheeks. Bert's sister, Winnie, was the bridesmaid, unfortunately attired in blue ; one of the younger Ticehursts was best man, and James gave the bride away. Claude felt a fool in his best clothes, yellow gloves, and large white buttonhole, and the words of the Marriage Service came to him full of tormenting irony and sweetness —irony because they were on the lips of Bert and Dora, blundering into matrimony like sheep into a flower garden ;

sweetness—or perhaps it was bitterness—because they might have been on his lips and another's.

They had champagne for the wedding breakfast and the general verdict was that they " couldn't have done the thing better." Patrick tied an old shoe behind the carriage which took the flustered couple to Rye, whence they were to go by train to Margate. After having discussed the relative merits of the Lake District, Devonshire, and the Isle of Man, each suddenly realized that the other wished to spend the honeymoon at Margate, a circumstance which cast a ray of hope on their future. James kissed the bride affectionately, and told her that he hoped she would be as good a wife as she had been a good sister, which made Dora cry. She was crying when she said good-bye to Claude, and when she drove off in the landau hired from the Broad Oak ; but she was squeezing Bert's red, fondling hand all the while.

Dora was missed at Spell Land, and perhaps it was Claude who felt her absence most. She had loved him from a child, with the peculiar love women feel for one whom they have taught and reared and beaten, and though he thought her a poor creature, her love had always been a pillow between him and the plank bed of life. There was no cause to miss her ministrations in the house. Her place was taken by a Miss Wellings, recommended to James by the farmer of Vine Hall, for whom she had " done " till matrimony gave him an unsalaried cook. She was a woman still in her thirties, but, in spite of her round red cheeks and black hair, she looked old, for she had lost all her front teeth except two narrow yellow incisors. She was not in the least perturbed by this shortcoming, and displayed her gums as freely in broad and genial grins as if her teeth had been as milk-white, large, and regular as those of Patrick, for whom, by the way, she had a strong liking. Neither was she disturbed by the breadth of her person ; she was enormously stout, but chose to accentuate the full curves of her bust by wearing skimpy white shirts, made to be worn with a collar, which, as her neck was practically non-existent, she always omitted.

Her rule was unlike the rule of Dora, who, in fact, had not ruled at all. Miss Wellings, in spite of her geniality, wielded a rod of iron in household affairs. She refused to " keep something hot " for those who were fooling with the dogs after breakfast was laid ; she never sewed on buttons without a rebuke ; and any of the men's litter which strayed into her sanctuaries she furiously impounded. She hardly liked Claude ; he sometimes answered her with asperity, and she once told him that she considered it every woman's duty to show herself a match for every man.

It was not till the first November mists had risen that Claude heard of Emily's marriage. Miss Wellings had forgotten to include bacon in her morning's purchases, and Claude offered—in response to her hints—to go over to the village to fetch it for her. The rashers were enveloped, according to custom, in an old newspaper, and he had not gone far along the homeward road before he saw, among spreading grease-stains :

" MILLS—BRANWELL. On the 25th of October, at St. Mary's, The Boltons, Oliver Crewdon Mills, son of the late Dr. J. Crewdon Mills, to Emily, daughter of the late Parish Branwell of Croydon."

There was more than a touch of irony in the way Fate had chosen to communicate her sentence to him, and he received it with the most unromantic sedateness. But his feet seemed suddenly turned to lead, and as he dragged them through the mud he realized that his disappointment had not, as he had thought, hitherto touched despair, and that it was not till this moment that Hope the jerry-builder had torn down his scaffolding.

The same evening Patrick brought home the news from a different source, the Broad Oak Inn.

" Here's a go ! Young Oliver has gone and married Miss Emily on the sly. I reckon as the old girl 'ull be middling mad about it."

James reckoned the same, and expressed his surprise that Oliver should have mated with such a quiet little miss

" By the way," said Pat, " I thought you were sweet on her, Claude. I know of your goings on, you dog !—never out of that there house, and a chase-me-for-ninepence look in your eye. I'm sorry it didn't come off—the size of her nose 'ud have been a middling good match for the size of your mouth. Ha ! ha ! "

His words were like a fireman's axe breaking open the dark shutters of a burning shop, and letting out the hidden conflagration. Claude sprang to his feet, and, seizing the first weapon that came to hand—which happened to be a knife—commanded him to take care what he said, or he'd be done for.

The knife was wrenched from his hand, and he was flung back into his seat amidst the laughter of Patrick, the upbraiding of James, and the " never in all my life ! " of Miss Wellings. Ever after that he was credited with a " temper," and it was some time before he was allowed to sit down to meals without a jocular allusion to the knives. Jokes died hard at Spell Land.

Perhaps it was fortunate that his elders chose to take a humorous rather than a suspicious view of his outburst, and were short-sighted enough to put it down to Patrick's insult to his looks, of which he had always been more proud than circumstances warranted. He gave no further indication of what he suffered. He was a living contradiction to the orthodox hero of romance. His appetite was enormous, and he slept heavily. Nature hung out only one red flag—he found it impossible to do without stimulants. He had never been much of a drinker, but now he was continually tapping the Spell Land cask of mild ale, which probably did not contain more alcohol than the average temperance drink, but would none the less put a comfortable warmth into his spirits. He realized that he was acting as weakly as the drunkard who pays for his relief with his own sickness and his neighbour's scorn, but he could not for the life of him forgo that grateful tingling of his aching nerves, that mellow light cast suddenly on the dark landscape. His brothers noticed that he drank more ;

also that he smoked so much that he could not afford to confine himself only to the best brands, as befitted the dignity of a yeoman farmer, but blackened his teeth with endless cheap and nasty cigarettes, which, as James said, " would have made a ten-acre man sit up." However, they looked upon these signals as indicative of the excitement and excess of youth, which one of them at least had known, and, beyond occasional mutterings from James and Miss Wellings about the " thin end of the wedge," little notice was taken of them.

About a week after Claude heard of the marriage he had a letter from Emily, dated from the Isle of Wight, where she and Oliver were spending their honeymoon. She gave him details of excursions and picnics, and looked back with a laugh at the adventures she had been through.

" Aunt Ethel wrote a simply furious letter in answer to the one Oliver sent her on our wedding day ; my husband " —oh, the tactless young wretch !—" does not, however, expect her to hold out long. She is very fond of him, you see. '

The letter was written in a tone of very ordinary friendliness till just before the signature.

" Claude, I wish I knew how to do my hair. Oliver says that now I am his wife I must be really smart. I'm not pretty, so I must try to make up for it by being smart. It's my hair that worries me most—you see, I have too much to dress easily. Oliver says I look like an owl, and yet he can't bear it when I brush it straight off my forehead."

Those lines made Shepherd furious. So Oliver was already beginning to undervalue his treasure ; Claude saw *diminuendo* written on the score of his affection. For Emily he overflowed with pity ; her struggles with her thick black hair struck him as infinitely pathetic. What beautiful hair it was ! He remembered it in the bedtime plait in which he had first seen it ; he remembered it under the round comb, and then in the soft coils that Oliver despised. That night he dreamed that he saw Oliver twist her hair round his

hand and wrench it, as he had sometimes done as a boy; he knew that the thing was impossible, but his dream made him hot with anger. If Oliver showed himself unworthy of this unutterable blessing he had stolen—— Thick mutterings in the pillow recorded Claude's intentions.

The next morning he burnt Emily's second letter. Some wise thing in his heart urged him to do this. She might consider their friendship possible, but he could not trust his heart as she trusted hers; there was danger in it. Youth soon rends up the shackles of despair, and hope had come back into Claude's life—as an enemy.

There were some awful days in that winter. Claude had much to be thankful for in the bumptiousness of youth, for the sorrows of youth are so fiery that, were it not for the moist, whistling wind of self-pity and self-admiration, few men would come out of them uncharred. He pitied himself enormously, and he admired himself enormously. He had become a creature of romance, haloed and important. He walked in the burning fiery furnace, but he also sat at the oven's mouth and watched himself pacing therein, a white-faced martyr in the company of angels.

But these grimaces could not always disguise the fixed mask of anguish. He might watch himself complacently in his sorrows, but he could not look in the same way on Emily's. Hers were ungilded and unsanctified; his dread for her was a torment that no amount of blessed conceit could assuage. Sometimes, in cool intervals, he would jeer at himself, and say that her troubles, present and future, existed only in his imagination; but usually he was obsessed by the idea of her suffering, and her letters confirmed it in him. They were quite ordinary letters—calm, friendly, and unaffected; but he read unutterable things into them. She did not tell him much, so he vowed she was reticent—that is to say, wretched. Sometimes two letters came close together, and he would think she tried to ease her heart by writing to one whom she knew sympathized; sometimes there were weeks between, and then he told himself she was too miserable to trust herself to write.

He occasionally thought of begging her to break off the correspondence, but that would distress her and betray him. He thought of leaving her letters unanswered, but that would merely be an insolent way of carrying out the former plan, and it would not only give her pain, but a bad opinion of him, who now lived for her good word.

His boat had been washed out of the narrow creek which, in his folly, he had thought was the ocean, and was now tossing on the high seas, with but one other ship in hail. That ship was David Gilmour, and in him he only half confided; he wanted him to say that he thought Emily would be happy.

"I can't understand how a girl like Emily can be happy with a fellow like Mills, and, what's more, I can't understand how it is she thinks she can."

"I attach no importance to the Franklin affair," said Gilmour. "Most young men of Mills's type find something important and romantic in an entanglement of that sort, to say nothing of their being easily impressed by women older, more worldly-wise, and more reckless than themselves. I lay the matter to the charge of Oliver's enormous conceit more than to any inherent vice."

"Then you think they'll be happy?"

"I don't say that. Indeed, I hardly think they will at first. If Emily had married Oliver ten years, say, from now, she might have found him sobered in his judgments and fairly steady in his affections. But as matters stand there are pretty sure to be outbreaks of the old evil during the first years of his married life. He's very young, you see, and so is Emily. I doubt if she will be inclined to look upon his faults, when they form a part of her present and future, as tolerantly as when they belonged to a past in which she had very little share. She is unusually forbearing up to a certain point, but very few girls—especially at Emily's ridiculous age—are patient and far-sighted enough to bear with a young husband's pranks."

Claude was silent, for he could not speak at once. He was like the patient who goes to the oculist to be soothed

and reassured about the mist floating before his eyes, and is told that it is cataract.

"I can't understand what made her do it," he mumbled at last.

"She's a woman, Claude, and she's in every woman's scrape. Most women could never tell you why they love the man they marry."

"That's just like Dora—she 'wants him,' that's all she knows."

"And I dare say it's all Emily knows. Oliver has been very good to her, and so far he has done nothing to wound her affection"—Claude winced—"and even if we had reason to expect Emily not to tumble blindly into love, we must remember that inconsistency is the only characteristic that a man may consistently look for in a woman. Even at her sternest and straightest we can never be quite sure what she will do next, or why she will do it; she is swayed mortally by her instinct, which civilization has thrown out of balance. If asked to define her, I should call her a mixture of the animal, the child, and the deuce; she is essentially timid, but she loves to play with fire, and she has a genius for picking up hot pokers by the wrong end. Emily has picked up her hot poker: perhaps she will have the wit to seize it by the handle before it burns her badly; perhaps she will drop it with a clatter which will wake up Mrs. Grundy; or perhaps—and very likely, being what she is—she will hold on to it with clenched fist till her hand is charred."

"And you don't think she'll be happy?" Claude reiterated stupidly.

"My dear fellow, how can I tell? I can but make logical deductions; and, being a woman, she will possibly send my logic flying. She is young, unfortunately, and therefore she expects much. Now, your sister Dora will bear with her man through thick and thin. She knows what to expect from him. He may drink, he may abuse her, he may be unfaithful to her, and she will reproach him for it, but she will forgive him. Now, Emily——"

He hesitated, for Claude could not keep the mad sorrow any longer from his face.

"My dear old chap, is it really that way?"

"Don't, sir! . . . I can't bear it. . . . I just about can't! Tell me that she won't have to eat her heart out!"

"How can I tell you, Claude? You and I are men, and we aren't going to pray that Emily may escape the consequences of her unwisdom, but that when they overtake her they may find her wise."

CHAPTER XV

STOCK WOOD—VERY, VERY HAPPY—" DIXIT INSIPIENS "

EARLY in April Emily and Oliver Mills came to Easeham. Miss Kingsley had relented, as everyone had expected her to do, and an element of danger crept into Claude Shepherd's life with Emily's proximity—she was too near.

However, he did not expect her visit to be a long one, and the angels had a weapon in her unaffected friendliness. Their meeting was a model of banality ; they discussed the weather, the young lambs, and the South African War, which was being waged in the far-off and unimportant world of action. Oliver was with them, frank and friendly, and a little inclined to swagger, calling Emily " my dear " at the end of every sentence, and talking of her to Claude as " Mrs. Mills." Young Shepherd was glad that Miss Kingsley's contempt of him would not allow these ordeals to be numerous.

Indeed, the occasion was not repeated. Miss Kingsley was hostile, Claude unwilling, and Emily perhaps a trifle chilled by his manner. But one other day stood out from the seven of her visit.

He was returning from Winter Land across the fields, and had just passed Stock Wood, when he saw Emily, sitting on the stile by the bostal, and dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

The sight of her in tears was still something new and alarming, and Claude paused involuntarily. Another second's glance at her was enough to destroy his resolution to pass her without a word.

" What's the matter, Emily ? "

She started, and lifted her face.

" Oh, Claude ! . . . I'm so . . . I never heard you come."

" You're unhappy." His teeth were set as he went up to her and leaned against the stile. " What is it, Em ? I want to know."

Even her naïveté took alarm. She slid hastily from her perch.

" It's only a private matter. I'm going home—no, not your way."

There was a crackling of the ash-twigs in Stock Wood.

" Here's Oliver," said Emily weakly, as Claude did not move.

Oliver came scrambling through the hedge. His brow was ruffled, and his face a trifle more florid than usual.

" How d'ye do, Shepherd ? Hullo ! still at it, Em ? I should have thought you could have managed to swallow your wrath in the best part of ten minutes. I'd be ashamed to carry on like that in public."

" What's wrong ? " asked Claude brusquely.

Oliver evidently had none of Emily's objections to telling his private affairs. It struck Claude that there was something strangely undignified about him, mind and body.

" Just because I want her to stay here with Aunt Ethel for a week or two, while I go back to town, up jumps the very devil in her ! I'm hanged if I'll be tied to my wife's apron-strings."

" You'd better take care how you treat her."

Claude spoke as a fool, because he felt as a lover.

" Oh ! " said Mills.

For a moment the two men stared at each other. Emily opened her mouth once or twice to speak, but did not utter a word.

" Oh," repeated Oliver at last, " if that's how the land lies, I'd certainly better take her back to town with me."

For another moment they stared. Claude began to repent his rashness, dreading that it might compromise Emily.

"It's you who'd better be careful," said Oliver at last—"you'll come to grief if you take to interfering between men and their wives."

"Well, mind how you behave, that's all."

"Oh, don't quarrel, you two!" cried Emily.

Claude could not tell whether it was on account of any doubts he might have entertained that Oliver took his wife back with him to London the next day, or whether the reason were more prosaic. He was inclined to think the former, for Emily's letters abruptly and unaccountably ceased. At first he told himself he was glad; her silence removed an almost intolerable strain. He remembered the letters he had sent in answer to hers—how he had written them over and over again till the keen edges of his thought had worn dull, and banality was possible. His heart gave a throb of pride; he had not written a line he was ashamed of, or at which her husband might take exception.

These thanksgivings were like gourds in their quick dying. At the end of three months he was back again in all his madness, writing to Emily to ask the reason of her silence.

The answer was prompt and brief:

"DEAR CLAUDE,

"Oliver would rather I did not write any more, so don't expect to hear from me again. I am very, very happy. Don't answer this.

"EMILY."

Those three lines were full of mystery, as well as of feverish disappointment. Why had Oliver forbidden her to write? That was not such a very great mystery after all. Why did she obey him so meekly? He had no proof that she had obeyed him meekly. She had obeyed him, that was all he knew; wives must obey their

husbands. Perhaps she herself had qualms and doubts. Emily was not the woman to throw over an old friend, even as a matter of obedience. Perhaps she saw the danger in Claude's heart—perhaps she saw it in her own.

Thus they followed him, those vain conjectures, and no solid wall of fact stood fast except, "I am very, very happy." What did Emily mean? What she said, he supposed. Even the most earnest wish to soothe his anxieties would not have made her say she was happy if it were not true. She must be happy, but he wondered what or who was making her so. Oliver, of course; he regretted his self-will, and was overwhelming his little bride with the tenderness, protectiveness, and generosity which had first won her to him. Claude hoped it was Oliver. Then suddenly he realized that he hoped it was not Oliver—that he hoped . . . Love is like atropine, paralyzing the focussing powers, doing away with the little helps and hints to vision afforded by imagination.

The ending of the correspondence was, however, undoubtedly a relief. Formerly his thoughts had hardly begun to be rational before a letter received or a letter to write sent them tumbling back into chaos. He was glad that Emily had at last seen the impossibility of their former relations. Now, as the weeks went by, he felt the fires in him dying down. He lost his mental and bodily restlessness; he smoked less and he drank far less, and he began to realize that there might after all be some importance in such things as horse-breeding, harvesting, and the South African War. He became less gloomy and unsociable—the depression of that winter and spring would have roused the suspicions of anyone more observant than Patrick and James; Miss Wellings, having never seen him in any other mood, chose to regard surliness and general hatefulness as his normal state of mind—and he destroyed a growing superstition in the neighbourhood that he had "not got all the chairs at home." Sometimes he would throw up his chin for thankfulness that vigour, peace, and

common sense had returned to him, and that his flesh was once more as the flesh of a little child.

But occasionally he could not prevent a dark belief that, though the weed had been torn up, the stout tap-root stood firm under the soil, draining all the goodness and vitality from it. Outwardly he was once more a stolid, hard-working farmer, talking of crops and current prices, smoking strong cigars, and drinking bad sherry, but deep in his heart were certain dark signs of the times. In spite of his returning interest in the affairs of daily life, he still felt vaguely that "nothing really mattered"—a sudden right-about-face of his existence would have disturbed merely the surface of things. He could feel interest, but not enthusiasm—occupation, but not anxiety. Besides, he found himself totally indifferent to women. Hitherto he had liked women, though shyly, and had felt immensely flattered if ever he heard that a woman, however uninteresting, was inclined to look on him admiringly; but now he did not care a rap for any amount of coyness. Moreover, his schoolboy love-affairs, over which he had been wont to romance a trifle, now seemed so many sickly dishes of milk and water, unworthy of the name of love.

He read a great deal that summer, but he found that his tastes had changed. He no longer cared for novels; the cardboard emotions of fiction gave little pleasure to the man who had felt the iron of reality enter into his soul. He read Darwin's *Voyage of the 'Beagle'* and *Origin of Species*, and, finding a translation of Nietzsche's *Human, All too Human* on a second-hand bookstall in Hastings, his thoughts suddenly galloped off on a new tack. Hitherto he had read no philosophy beyond a little Swedenborg, who certainly had not much in common with Nietzsche except his hatred of St. Paul, which Claude, too, dimly shared. In Nietzsche he found some of his most daring thoughts materialized. Of late a certain anarchy had crept into his mental outlook, and Nietzsche fed in him the joy of being shocking. He loved to shock James with his views on Providence and the inspiration of Scripture, but though

James was easy enough to shock, he was impossible to convince, for he argued like Martin Luther, and no matter how many arguments one was able to bring forward or demolish, he always had his " Hoc est Corpus Meum " chalked on the table.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MONTH OF PROVIDENCE—NO NEWS AND ILL NEWS—A YOUNG MAN'S BREAD—HIGH HEDGES AND A HIGH WIND—THREE STEPS

SUMMER passed and October came. It was the month of providence, of preparation for the coming year. The Spell Land brothers sowed their winter wheat, their turnip-fields were drilled, and the auctioneer's column in the Hastings paper gave notice of their sales of underwood.

Claude heard little or nothing of Emily during that month, or during the following autumn, though he often found himself incontinently craving for news. At the beginning of winter, however, he heard, first through a village rumour, and then—more reliably—through David Gilmour, that Mills had lost his clerkship at the London Joint-Stock Bank. He had never been a conscientious worker ; he was constantly applying for leave, and showing himself both unpunctual and unbusiness-like. Miss Kingsley considered the manager's action a shocking exhibition of blindness ; in an artist of Oliver's genius all that was mechanical and Philistine must naturally go to the wall. She was nevertheless rather taken aback by her nephew's announcement that he meant henceforth to devote himself entirely to art. Hitherto he had been only moderately successful as a free-lance. He had obtained one or two commissions, but he had done his best to ruin himself by throwing up others, which, though accepted, turned out on experience not to suit his humour. Moreover, his talent was not great enough for painless development,

and Oliver never took pains. A patient, plodding toiler with his capabilities might in time have made a name for himself, but Mills shirked labour, neglected detail, tired of monotony. He had fine ideas, but blundered, through sheer technical ineptitude, in their execution.

Claude was not surprised at the news ; for some time he had been wondering how the London Joint-Stock Bank could tolerate a fool like Mills. All he hoped was that Emily would not suffer too ruthlessly by the change. He chafed bitterly at the fact that, owing to his estrangement from Miss Kingsley, he could hear no news of her except as a twice-told tale.

He found his heart more tender that winter than of old. In November Dora had given birth to a shrivelled, puny baby, which apparently found its first glimpse of the world so unattractive that it took immediate steps to leave it, by contracting every possible ailment from croup to measles. All Claude's pity went out to his sister. During the months of storm and stress he had scarcely thought of her, but now he often spend an hour or so in her kitchen, talking to her while she worked. She worked much harder even than at Spell Land, but she looked happier than in Spell Land days. Her child, the hope of three seasons, was a source of constant anxiety and discomfort, and her husband showed no wish to confute the parochial estimate of his character ; but neither the mother's nor the wife's tragedy was able to drive Dora into rebellion. She quoted James's verdict on the former—" It was the Lord's doing "—and her own on the latter was as inexplicably comforting—" Men will be men." She cried a great deal sometimes, she told Claude, but she felt sure she had done right to marry Bert. He made her unhappy, but she would have been much unhappier without him, and, after all, they had their moments of atoning love, their confidences and their jokes, little likes and dislikes held in common. Had they not both wanted to go to Margate for the honeymoon ?

It was to Dora that Claude owed the help of a sudden recoil from matrimony. Hitherto he had regarded it as

part of the duty and pleasure of man, but now he detected a taste of the prosaic, even the sordid, in wedding-cake. He knew that he had nibbled only from Dora's plate, and that doubtless he would have found more sugar in her husband's share; but those hours spent in the Tanhouse kitchen, among the odours of cooking and washing, drove away a little rosy cloud of sentiment which had drifted into his heart and dimmed his eyes. Though he was on Dora's side, he had a sneaking compassion for Bert, asked to watch the saucepan while she ironed, or to hold the baby while it screamed, and occasionally scolded and called a fool; for though Dora was mildness itself compared to Miss Wellings, she would now and then give vent to her feelings in a shrill, whining voice, often breaking into tears.

Side by side with this distaste grew up a hunger for independence, a young man's bread of life, of which Claude had had but very few bites so far. Outwardly, he had never been on better terms with his humdrum and subordinate existence. James thought him too much given to "free-thinkin' rubbish," but on the whole he and his brothers were excellent friends. He shared Patrick's delight in the new hay-elevator, bought at last, and James's half-regrets at the extravagance. Even Miss Wellings had become tolerant, and showed unprecedented consideration for his feelings in frequent treacle puddings. But underneath its apparent smoothness the trivial round jarred and humiliated; there was too much rubbing of shoulders at Spell Land. During the months of bitterness, when his mind was like a piece of faulty glass, grotesquing all things, he had complained to himself of his family's lack of sympathy and understanding—he would have been furious if anyone had discovered his secret, but he chafed and fumed at his brothers' obtuseness in not realizing that the skies had fallen. Now, on the contrary, he thought them all interference. "Where are you going?" "Where have you been?" unannounced and unapologized entrances into his room while he was dressing or tubbing; the cool annexation of his belongings; the entire lack of privacy or

respect for individual property, whether material or moral —it all maddened him, and there was no hiding his head. The very walls at Spell Land were so thin that his tossings in his bed were heard in the next room, where Patrick slept with his dogs, and made the subject of his breakfast conversation. One could never be alone.

He thought of leasing a small holding, where he could be his own master, live as he chose, work and sleep as he chose, free from fraternal friction. He even looked at one or two steadings advertised to let. But his brothers shrank with disgust from the idea of a Shepherd becoming a small-holder, and refused him the financial help without which he could do nothing. Moreover, in his own breast were a few grains of false pride, the consequence both of environment and of inherited blood. None of the " delightful little properties " he inspected proved satisfactory, and after a time the fever cooled. Spell Land was beautiful, and his position as farmer of Spell Land was honourable ; once more he threw himself into the old routine. The days were growing longer, and in the woods there were faint red signs of spring.

Claude Shepherd admired coincidence in a novel—he called it " clever " ; it seemed to him to give a hint to life. In his own life there had been but few coincidences, though he was one of those men who, when they walk with a light into a room full of escaping gas, exclaim when the roof flies off, " There's a coincidence ! "

However, it was certainly a coincidence that one February evening he should leave Battle Station at the same time as a little woman who, after staring for a moment into a pastrycook's window, walked on, and disappeared down Marley Lane. Claude did not see her, being engrossed in thought and nicotine ; he, too, was going down Marley Lane, but he had first of all to make some purchases for Miss Wellings in Battle High Street.

He had been to Robertsbridge, and along the light railway to Benenden. Near Benenden was a small farm

to let, and the offer, tempting and cheap, had lured him into his old dreams of independence. The tenant was anxious to dispose of the four remaining years of his lease, and was selling the stock at a tantalizingly low price. However, on his arrival at Little Nineveh, he found the fellow had withdrawn his advertisement; he would have one more struggle with Nature before he handed her over, half tamed, to another. Shepherd was not disappointed. The place, though suitable in every other way, was repellently lonely; it was not worth the sacrifice of his dignity. So he left the small-holder—a young man of great communicativeness and small experience, one of the army of incapables James and Patrick despised—and, mastering the vagaries of the light railway time-table, arrived at Battle a couple of hours earlier than he had expected.

It was dark, however. Masses of heavy, ragged cloud blundered every now and then across the moon, a timid slip, flung on her back, as if she could not stand up to the wind. He could hardly fight the wind himself as he plunged down Marley Lane. In the west there was still a faint glow, barred with cloud, but ahead of him was the night, made additionally black by driving rain and overarching trees.

A momentary gleam of lamps and firesides as he walked through Sedlescombe served only to emphasize the darkness beyond. He took the lower, shorter, rougher road that winds between high hedges past Mabel's Farm and Jacob's Farm to Spell Land. The rain was not constant; it came with the wind in sudden gusts, not cold, but aguishly damp. Every now and then the clouds parted, and showed him the swinging Bear, Orion, or Cancer, and sometimes the scared moon.

Once, just after he had passed Mabel's Farm, the moon suddenly slipped from behind a pile of cumulus, and made the wet surface of the road shine like pewter. By her light Claude saw a woman toiling up the hill in front of him. She trod wearily, with bent head and swinging arms, and he pitied her, for he saw that she wore no coat or wrap of

any kind. He was quickly making up to her when it struck him that perhaps she would be frightened to find herself alone with him in the dark lane. More than once, in the old careless days, he had taken a fiendish delight in terrifying the girls who wandered arm-in-arm through the lanes after dusk—a squeal and a dart, and then a flirty, " Oh, it's you, Mus' Shepherd—well, I never did ! " It had amused him then, but his sense of humour had altered of late, and the droop of the woman's shoulders told him plainly that she, too, would not appreciate the joke. He hung back, but continued to stare at her—something about her was vaguely familiar, and yet he felt sure that she was not one of the romps he had teased so oafishly. In spite of his slackened pace, he was now close to her, and the moon still shone—the shadow of her hat hid her neck and hair, but he could see the pattern of her blouse—great ugly checks—and the sense of familiarity was no longer vague. He had always associated Emily Mills with something hideous in blouse patterns. This woman's blouse reminded him of Emily's ; this woman herself . . . But it was impossible, and he sternly called imagination to heel. However, imagination, encouraged by actualities, refused to obey ; the resemblance went further than the blouse, and if he had not known that Emily was at this moment in London, with Oliver Mills . . . His heart beat fiercely as unconsciously he quickened his pace. What would Emily be doing here, at this time, and alone ? His eyes and the cheverel light had deceived him. But as he drew level with her, the woman pulled herself upright, squaring her shoulders and throwing back her head. The attitude seemed to say, " There's no use whining." Claude did not hesitate any more. His brain giddy with mingled dread and eucharist, he sprang forward, and caught a glimpse of her profile.

" Emily ! "

She started and swung round, then moved back a step or two towards the hedge.

" Claude ! "

For a moment neither could say more, then "Claude . . ." repeated Emily weakly, and pulled forward her hat, which had fallen backwards and awry.

They faced each other in the dim storm-light. Shadows of leaves flew over Emily's face, making it mysterious. It seemed as if her lips were twitching violently, but it might only have been the shadows. The pity deepened in his heart, for he saw that she was with child.

"What are you doing here?" he asked at length, in a grotesquely matter-of-fact voice.

"I—I'm going to see my aunt."

"But you shouldn't be walking in the dark and rain alone."

He knew that Emily's world must have spun off its orbit, but he chose to speak as if it still circuited as before.

"You've no coat and no umbrella," he continued as she was silent, "and your blouse is soaked." Then he added the only question it was any use asking, and perhaps the last he should have asked. "Where's Oliver?"

Emily lifted her arms, and let them fall hopelessly at her sides, while her chin sank forward.

For a moment there was another constrained silence, which told both of them much. Claude felt his calmness oozing away—after all, it had been the calmness of a man stunned rather than of a man controlled. He tried to retain it by a return to actualities.

"Look here," he said briskly, "you must put on my overcoat. Please don't object; I really don't want it; indeed, I shouldn't be wearing it if I wasn't too lazy to carry it."

Emily hesitated a moment, then slipped her arms into the sleeves.

"It's very cold," she said, and smiled faintly.

"You're tired." The night certainly was not cold.

"No—I'm not really tired. I dare say it's because I—I'm hungry."

"Haven't you had any tea?"

"No."

"Nothing since lunch?"

"Since breakfast."

Again a torrent of questions rose to his lips, but he checked it by feeling in his pockets among such mundanities as candles, lard, and Navy Cut. At last he remembered what he wanted, and, diving into the pocket of the overcoat Emily wore, he pulled out a bag of biscuits.

"Here, you'd better eat these."

"If I had known you carried anything to eat, I shouldn't have said I was hungry."

"Please don't be unreasonable. Why shouldn't you eat 'em?"

"Because I shouldn't have complained."

"That's pride, Emily. And listen here: I bought those biscuits for Miss Wellings, but I'm justabout hungry myself, and want to eat some. I don't like to do it, because she has a bad opinion of me, and would call me a greedy beast for it; but if I shared 'em with you, that 'ud be politeness, you know."

Whether it was hunger or this childish rigmarole which persuaded Emily he could not tell. She held out her hand, and he put a biscuit into it. The other hand he drew through his arm.

That walk to Jacob's Farm was like a walk in a dream. As in a dream, the night, the wind, the rain-gusts fell into the background, and became nothing more than the dim, troubling accompaniment of an emotion. There was one point, however, where the rules of dreamland did not operate—he thought in retrospect; he saw himself moving through that day, inspecting Little Nineveh, puffing at his pipe in a third-class smoker, buying dull necessaries for Miss Wellings in Battle High Street, all unthinking and unknowing of what the byways had in store. Sometimes he wished that he dreamed a dream from which there could be no waking, and would walk on for ever between high hedges against a high wind, Emily's hand between his arm and his heart.

"Isn't this Jacob's Farm? Don't you turn up here?"

"No," he said, "I shall take you home."

"Oh, please don't."

"But I must. I can't possibly let you go alone."

"Come with me as far as Fryman's Farm, if you like—you can take the turning there—but not all the way."

He said nothing, and they went forward.

The wind had played sad havoc with Emily's hair, which hung in dripping wisps about her neck. There was rain on her face, too, which looked pinched and pale in the rare bursts of moonlight.

"Am I walking too fast for you?"

"No, thank you—not now, at least, but I should like to go slower at the hill."

She lifted her face to his to say this, and the mischief was done.

"Oh, Emily, won't you tell me why you're here? I can't understand it. Where's Oliver? Have you left him? Why do you make a stranger of me? Won't you tell me why you're here?"

"No—I—I can't. Please don't ask me, Claude. You're sure to hear some day, and I'd rather someone else told you than I."

"Does Miss Kingsley expect you?"

"No."

He was wretched. The worst, then, must have happened. Dim, baneful conjectures troubled him, and he had difficulty not to ask more questions. How would Emily be received? Surely no woman could be harsh with her now. He would take her to Easeham himself; he would not leave her till——

"This is Fryman's Farm, Claude."

"So it is, Emily."

"You will leave me here."

"Not I, Emily!"

She stopped, and drew her arm from his.

"You must—indeed you must. Please don't be unkind. I've only a few steps further to go.

"But I can't let you go alone."

" You won't understand. I've done this thing alone, and I'll take the consequences alone. I shan't hide behind anyone. Claude, don't make me mean."

Her blanched face was raised imploringly to his, and a dauntless soul looked out of terrified eyes.

" Em, you make me justabout miserable—a beast."

" You'll be a beast if you come with me. I implore you to go—and take your overcoat. Yes, or I shall drop it in the road. I promise you to get into dry things directly I reach the cottage. I'm not a baby, and I won't hide from a whipping. Take your overcoat."

But he was to be daunted by neither her spirit nor her bathos.

" I'm coming," he said, " and if you won't walk, I'll carry you."

To his horror, she began to cry.

" No, don't—please don't ! I've only one thing left to do in life, and that's to play a straight game. Besides, if it's for my sake you come, you'll only make matters worse. It'll set Aunt Ethel against me if you bring me to her house—wearing your overcoat, too "—(" Oh, damn that overcoat ! ")—" I know I'm a fool to cry, but I've been silly for months."

Her voice was becoming shrill, and she was so unlike herself that he was cowed, and feared, in her present state, to oppose her further.

" Very well ; I'll go, since you wish it."

She held out her hand for good-bye, and as the light fell on her face he saw huge grey rings under her eyes.

" Em, why did you tell me you were happy ? "

" I ? When ? "

" You wrote and said, ' I am very, very happy.' It was a lie."

" It wasn't. I know what you mean now. I was happy then, and I'm still happy. I—I'm going to have a child."

" I'm glad."

" So am I. I was frightened when I first knew, but that wore off. I'm beginning to feel frightened again now."

"Don't be frightened."

"I'll try not to be. I've no right to be frightened of the consequences of my own acts. Claude, I've got something to tell you."

She trembled, and he waited in silence.

"I may die, you know; I may never see you again; and I—I want to say that I'm sorry for the words I spoke to you eighteen months ago in Kensington Gardens."

"I deserved them, Emily."

"I don't know anything about that, but I—I'm sorry. I've felt miserable about it, and I dreaded the thought of dying without telling you how sorry I am."

"You ain't going to die."

"Oh no!" and she smiled nervously. "Good-bye."

She went three steps, and the darkness swallowed her up.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MISCHIEF OF DREAMS—THE SCAPEGOAT—NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES—CATCH POINTS !—UNSANCTIFIED

THERE is a time when spring, till then triumphant, suddenly falls back and allows winter to snatch another fortnight from the year. When Claude woke the morning after his tramp through the wind with Emily, he realized that he had come to those days. The air had lost that touch of balm and promise which had made the last few mornings sweet; the first faint scents, the first faint stirrings, had gone from the hedgerows, and November might have been the month of those bleak fallows and skeleton woods.

Though physically refreshed, he was not the better for his night's sleep. Dreams are a solid danger to emotional man. All that night he had walked with Emily in and out of woods; he had held her hand, he had fondled it against his breast; he had kissed her thick hair, wet with rain, and her pale cheeks, wet with tears and rain. He had lain with his head in her lap, looked up into her eyes, and drawn down her face to his lips. He had wakened in all the anguish of a prisoner who dreams of the mountains.

That day he was to realize how the scope of reflex action becomes enlarged in crises of emotion. His dressing, his work before breakfast, and his breakfast itself, were as perfunctory as his breathing, and as satisfactorily performed—even to his holding out his plate to Miss Wellings for a second helping of bacon.

It was towards the end of breakfast that the spell broke.

"That niece of Miss Kingsley's back again," said Patrick.

"I know that," said James.

"But Claudie doesn't."

Claude thought of saying that he did, but changed his mind.

"He's blushing," said Pat.

"I ain't!"

"Oh, I beg pardon! I saw your face go like the rind of a Dutch cheese instead of the inside o't, so I thought perhaps you were blushing. Wrong, I dare say."

Realizing that it was prejudicial to grind his teeth, Claude restrained himself, and put on a fine air of incredulity.

"How do you know she's back? Who told you?"

"Miss Boord at the shop told Sarah, and Sarah told me; and James had it from old Vine, who lives opposite Miss Kingsley, and can see into her parlour when he stands on the table. What more would you have?"

Apparently all Claude wanted more was another cup of tea.

"I wonder why she left her husband," said James.

"Because he behaved like a brute, I expect," said Miss Wellings, glaring at her table full of males.

"Gave her a licking," suggested Blackman, the carter, who often bestowed such favours on his wife. "Women never knows how to taake their fust licking, surelye!"

"Went off with another gal, more likely," grinned Patrick; "and I don't blame him much. That was a poor little piece of woman-flesh."

"As you're going, Claude," said Miss Wellings, "don't you forget them biscuits of mine which you never brought yesterday. You can easily make time to ride up to the shop on your bike."

He found time soon after eleven. By then the fury in which he had left the breakfast-table was dead, and for the first time since his meeting with Emily he began seriously to survey his position. He considered himself the victim of fate, unfairly hunted down. Just when his love had fallen

into a sleep which might have passed painlessly into death, circumstance, decorated with coincidence, had kicked him up as crazy and as crude as ever.

Claude railed at circumstance, and he railed, too, at Emily; for Emily had been, he considered, the wren hidden in the eagle's plumage which, when the eagle had ceased to soar, fluttered out and upwards. Circumstance had flung Emily and him together, had laughed at them and left them; then Emily had of her own accord removed the real, because the spiritual, barrier between them by asking his forgiveness. It was just like a woman, he thought bitterly, to teach a man a lesson and then retract every word of it in a moment of weakness and emotion. No doubt her apology had relieved her heart, but it had added tenfold to the burden of his. It did not imply that the rebuke had been unmerited, or that she regretted the circumstances which had parted her from him, but it brought both within conjecture.

He blushed at the hurricane of joy which, at this realization, invaded his thoughts, scattering regret, fear, anxiety, and mystification, whipping his blood into recklessness and his brain into delirium. Only artificial barriers, it told him, stood now between him and Emily—conventions, man-made laws. But, as usual, violence brought about its own downfall. Reaction ordered him to cease his caperings and look realities in the face. After all, he only guessed that Emily's attitude towards him had changed, and in his heart he knew that it was cant to sneer at "conventions" and "man-made laws," and that something more vital than either was at stake. Besides, all this struggling and chiding might be vain—she might die at the birth of her child. Poor Em! The hurricane ceased, and the clouds that it had scattered gathered more darkly than before.

However, he was eager for news, and was unusually gruff that evening when he found that his brothers had gathered none. Emily had told him that he would be sure to hear the reason for her return, but so far nothing had reached him. Her piteous condition—scantily clothed,

penniless, and foodless since her breakfast—all pointed to a storm, and her reticence confirmed those auguries. His blood boiled as he pictured the early morning scene that had driven her forth. Her husband became guilty of every crime in Claude's imagination. Of one thing he was sure: only the direst necessity—had she not said so herself?—could have driven her to Miss Kingsley, and he shuddered to think of the sorrows that had made her husband's roof more intolerable to her than her aunt's.

The next morning and afternoon were equally sterile. He could eat no dinner, but, contrary to his custom and his principles, he drank several cups of tea. The tea made him feel more depressed than ever, and added a pinch of nervousness to his mental stew. Half-way through the afternoon's work he came indoors, and took a mug to the ale-cask. He had no idea how much he drank; all he knew was that he did not wipe his mouth till a faint warmth had crept into his heart and a faint light into his eyes, and Miss Wellings was half-way through the lecture she she had started at the second pint—"They all begins that way . . ."

The landscape looked brighter, however, and after tea he thought he would go to see Dora. He found her busy with her cream-pans, so squatted on a stool in the dairy.

"Heard the news about Mrs. Mills?" said Dora.

"Yes—she's back at Miss Kingsley's."

"Oh, I didn't mean that—everybody knows that, of course. I meant about her baby."

Claude thanked Heaven that he sat with his back to the light.

"It's a girl," continued Dora; "born early this afternoon. Winnie was up at the village and heard the news."

"Does she know how the mother is?"

"Doing splendidly, I believe. I expect she's furious that it ain't a boy, though."

Claude was silent. Dora must have thought him strangely uninterested in his childhood's playfellow.

"Poor thing!" she ejaculated, sniffing at the buttermilk. "I'm sorry for some women, Claude."

"I don't suppose she minds its being a girl," he mumbled stupidly.

"Oh, it wasn't that I was thinking of. The first one don't really matter, though I could have killed Muriel. But to have left her husband after only eighteen months . . ."

"Do you know why she left him?"

Dora shook her head.

"I know nothing for certain. Miss Boord was saying she thinks it was something to do with another woman, but I don't see what she can know about it."

"Has anyone seen Miss Kingsley? I wonder what she thinks."

"I reckon she's furious. She never could abide spending money, or Mrs. Emily either, and now she'll have to spend a mint of one all for the sake of t'other."

Claude's heart was too full for entire restraint.

"Drat that woman! It makes me sick to think of Emily being flung on her charity at such a time."

"Oh, don't you worry about that, Claude; it's her time that keeps her safe. No woman 'ud ever be anything but good to another when it came to the hour, however much she hated her between whiles. Look at old mother Ticehurst—she's a beast, if ever there was one; but when I had my pains, my own mother couldn't have cared for me kinder."

"I'm not afraid of that; after all, Miss Kingsley ain't a fiend. But when Emily's well again, what 'ull she do? I—I'd like to have a word or two with her husband."

"It's none of your affair, and I dare say it's just as much her fault as his."

"Nonsense! You don't know either of 'em."

"Lord! Look at them potatoes!" cried Dora, opening the larder-door. "What a turn they gave me! Claude, did you ever see potatoes shine like that?"

" Phosphorus," said Claude, looking over her shoulder, and sensible enough to be grateful for the interruption, after which the conversation flowed into safer channels.

The days went by, and over a fortnight passed without any voice more certain or less shrill than Rumour's explaining the mystery of Emily's return. That her trouble had to do with another woman was now pretty clear, but details varied with the detailer. Miss Kingsley was evidently trying to " hush the matter up," with the result that it was discussed in every public-house. The dark saying, " She's as much to blame as he," spoiled more than one pint of beer for young Shepherd, and one day he appealed to the only silent man in Easeham to help him smother tattle with the truth. David Gilmour, in spite of his heresies, had always been welcome at the Cackle Street cottage, and he offered to impress Miss Kingsley with the fact that if she did not herself pronounce sentence, her nephew would be at the mercy of lynch law.

One night at Widow's Farm he was able to give Claude a true version of Emily's tragedy.

" Did Emily tell you this herself ? "

" Yes ; she was down for the first time this afternoon, and was very anxious that I should see her and her baby."

" Was she bitter about Mills ? "

" To a certain extent. His deception of her seemed to weigh heavier than his infidelity."

" Brute ! . . . I never trusted him, sir, but I never believed him capable of deserting Emily for that——" Young Shepherd finished the sentence frankly.

" Personally, I didn't imagine that she'd interfere with him again. But matters seem to have gone further in the first instance than I was aware of. That's what Emily feels so keenly—her husband lied to her before their marriage."

" And is he now with this woman ? "

" We know nothing about him. Miss Kingsley wrote

to tell him of the child's birth, but he has never answered."

"Did Emily suspect for any length of time, or was it a sudden discovery?" And he thought of the hungry, coatless figure of his Emily, speaking of all that was sudden, undreamed of, and catastrophic.

"It seems that she had her doubts and anxieties for some time, but his jealousy on her account deceived her; she could not think that her husband was playing fast and loose with his own vows while he was continually reminding her of hers—poor innocent! It's his treachery she can't bear to think of, and that, I'm afraid, she can't forgive."

"But—but do you want her to forgive him?"

"Of course—don't you?"

Claude coloured, and gnawed his lip.

"My good man, think how hideous it will be for these two if they aren't reconciled—married in name, but having none of a wife's or a husband's privileges—Oliver probably driven to the dogs, and Emily living on charity."

"Won't he contribute to her maintenance? He can be made to."

"Yes, but Miss Kingsley would rather spend her last halfpenny than drag her darling Oliver through the mud of a Judicial Separation."

Claude laughed miserably. "That's the worst of it all. The only human being Emily can go to in her trouble is the woman who's helped get her into it, and has been against her all through."

"I often think, Claude, that you and Emily judge Miss Kingsley more harshly than she deserves. She has in her the makings of a fine woman; her affections have been few, but they have been absolutely whole-hearted. Wherein she fails is that she is a woman of a Single Idea—economical gentility—and as her affections have invariably pulled her contrary to this idea, of which, however, she has refused to leave hold, her nature has been pulled crooked, warped. If she had been of weaker mould, love might have

dragged her from her Idea ; but as things are, she has been doing violence to her nature without influencing its bend ; she has had all the pains, and none of the benefits, of sacrifice."

" It makes no difference to Emily—what she is at bottom. She ought to force that brute to pay up, however much she loves him."

" He has been doing very badly of late, and I doubt if Emily would ever get twopence out of him, no matter what order were made."

" A nice look-out for her if she goes back ! "

" Of course, I don't mean her to return just yet. It couldn't be managed, and he doesn't deserve it. But I hope that in the future, when he is less weak and she less hard, they may meet, and forget their past."

" How can she forget his lies ? How can you ask her to cheapen herself by going back to a man who has dishonoured and insulted her ? "

" He's very young, Claude, and in ten years' time may be quite a respectable member of society—if only he can be made to stick to his profession, and to see what a wretch he has been. They both of them married too young, before they really knew their own minds ; that's where the mischief started—new wine in old bottles. And listen here, my boy : I don't want you to think that Emily isn't to blame in this, for she is."

" You mean to say that she should have been weak enough to have forgiven him on the spot ? "

" I certainly don't. But because he had deceived her, there was no good tearing passion to tatters. If she had reasoned wisely and calmly, it's probable that she might have made him utterly ashamed of himself ; as matters stand, he no doubt thinks himself injured and her to blame. Emily has a very good notion of taking the consequences, but she's too young to be unconventional enough to realize that very often the best and most thankless way of taking the consequences is simply to pick up the pieces. If Emily wasn't Mills's wife, I shouldn't dream of asking her to risk

her future by marrying him now, but as she has married him, she must make the best of her mistake."

Claude did not share Gilmour's hopes. Oliver seemed to him such utterly base metal that he could see no happiness in the future, however distant, of anyone associated with him. More than that, he did not want him to bring happiness to Emily. He would have moved heaven and earth to serve her; he would have denied her no peace, no hope, no alleviation that his love or his life could give, but he grudged her every easier drawing of the breath that Oliver brought. Let circumstance part them, law, convention, misunderstanding, Mrs. Grundy, but not her love for Mills. . . .

Each day that passed was a full-length portrait of Emily. While she was with her husband, he had never pictured her workaday life, eating, drinking, walking, sleeping, because Oliver would have inevitably come into such pictures. But now a vision of her was always with him, lying in her bed or on the sofa, sitting up to take her meals —nursing her child, till Dora told him that she was not able to nurse it herself. At the end of three weeks he tried to pull himself together and to walk more warily, for he realized that his intercourse with Emily might any day be renewed. She would now be convalescent, and, passing through the village, he might see her at the cottage window, or he might meet her in the Cackle Street. He shunned the village, working strenuously on the farm, but he could not drive away his thoughts, and he saw that though he was yet able to put some physical control on himself, mentally he had bolted. His mind was like a runaway express, still rocking along the lines, and comparatively safe till the dreaded signal, "Catch Points!" and then . . .

The day of disaster came earlier than he had expected. A few mornings later Miss Wellings sat down to breakfast big with news.

"Mrs. Mills's baby's dead—bad feeding, I believe. It had convulsions yesterday afternoon, and was gone before

Dr. Field could come—and she never thought of christening it, neither."

"It's the Lord's doin'," said James. "Bad feedin', was it?"

"Yes. I say a woman's no right to have a baby if she don't know how to feed it."

"Dr. Field should have seen to that."

"He can't be always looking in. And there's Miss K. for ever trying to do things on the cheap—I hope she's pleased now."

"I don't suppose she's sorry."

Claude kept his eyes fixed on his plate during the rest of the conversation, and a minute or two after it had drifted, by way of the corresponding bereavement of the Jersey cow, into a rather frank obstetric discussion between Patrick and Blackman, he rose from the table, and, cramming the remainder of his breakfast, according to Spell Land custom, into his pocket, went out into the yard.

So Fate hits hard when once she has the scourge in hand, and under her thong the bent back of a girl just out of the sorrows of motherhood. Poor little Em! her child might have built her a new hope, and brought her back into the faith of the old love. . . . Claude snapped his teeth savagely together at the pang of feral joy that shot into his heart as he realized this. Thank Heaven the child was dead!

From the shut cowshed door came the lowing of the Jersey for her calf, and shame stifled the momentary flare of exultation. What a brute he was! How thoroughly base were all his most intimate emotions! He hated and despised himself for being capable of a second's rejoicing in Emily's sorrow. Wandering round the little garden, bathetically munching two-inches-thick sandwiches of bread and bacon, Claude indulged in Werther-like ravings against himself and Fate, and a longing to atone to Emily for the scoundrelism of both. In the end his atonement took no loftier shape than a bunch of daffodils, the only flowers the garden, neglected for the farmyard, allowed to inter-

fere with the stuffy smell of ribes that haunted it from March to May. They might give her pleasure, he reflected guilelessly, especially if he wrote, "From your sincere friend, Claude Shepherd." In her loneliness and humiliation it would comfort her to remember her friend.

So he picked some daffodils, and asked Sarah, a dairy-girl who lived in the village, to hand them in at Miss Kingsley's on her way home. He had hardly seen the last of their yellow against Sarah's blue sleeve before he realized that courtesy would require Emily to write a letter of thanks. All the next day he waited eagerly for that letter, and was worked into a state of querulous excitement when by evening it had not appeared. What had happened? Had the paper bearing his message become unfastened from the bunch? Sarah swore to its being there when she handed in the flowers. Was Emily offended? How could she be! Was Miss Kingsley offended? Miss Kingsley be hanged!

By the next morning excitement had swollen into obsession. Though he realized that about the best thing that could happen would be a total ending of his intercourse with Emily, his soul hung upon that letter. He struggled with himself till noon; then he lost the physical self-control which had hitherto stood between him and catastrophe. He was in the river wheatfield, and suddenly he flung down the whip he carried, muttered something incoherent to Blackman and his boy, and marched off towards Easeham village.

It was a warm day—true spring—and he thought that Emily might very probably be walking in the village or in the fields. If he prowled near the Cackle Street cottage he should see her returning, and, apparently quite by accident, they would meet. He covered the distance between Spell Land and Easeham, usually fifty minutes' walk, in half that time. He walked twice up and down the Cackle Street; then he noticed a girl in a garden stare at him, and he realized that his conduct might look erratic. He went into the inn and had a glass of sherry; then he thought of going

home, for he saw that he was playing the fool; but he lacked self-denial. If he hung about the village till nightfall he was bound to see Emily, and what could appear more natural and accidental than their meeting? Those at home would find his absence perplexing, but he had been behaving oddly for over a year; one freak more or less would not matter. Since he had started, let him finish the game.

It was one o'clock. Emily would now be dining; he need not expect to see her for half an hour at least. He would go to the Red Lion and have some more sherry. He wandered aimlessly about the village, wishing he had brought his pipe, till at last, quite tired out with doing nothing, he went into the churchyard, and threw himself down in the shadow of an elm.

He lay on his back, staring at the heavy spring leafage, which every now and then parted before the breeze, and showed him the sky, whimpled with the mists of noon. He had forgotten all the causes of the great effect—the child's death, the daffodils, and Sarah—all he was conscious of was his craving to see Emily. He realized that he was unfit to meet her, incapable of speaking to her, but nothing would drag him from that village till they had met and spoken.

Footsteps sounded on the flagged path of the churchyard. It was Mr. Dumbleton, the curate. He saw Claude, nodded to him, and disappeared into the vestry. Perhaps someone was going to be married.

A few more minutes went by, and Claude was half thinking of going back to the road, when he became conscious of a droning sound beyond the church, in the part of the graveyard hidden from him by the tower. He had heard no other footsteps on the flags, but it was possible that someone had come in by the grass-path from the north gate. Conjecture and curiosity brought him to his feet and the other side of the churchyard. Conjecture had been right, in spite of rashness, for there, where the poor are buried, far from the pomp of headstones, stood

a group of three—Mr. Dumbleton, Miss Kingsley, and Emily.

Claude did not at first realize that it was a funeral, as the clergyman wore no surplice, merely his gaunt cassock, with the cape that sent the stink of Popery to James's nostrils. But he soon saw that they stood by an open grave, and recognized the curate's drone as one of the Burial Service prayers.

" The Grace of Our Lord . . ." Mr. Dumbleton crossed himself, and Miss Kingsley was pat with her " Amen." Emily neither moved nor spoke. The clergyman went back into the church, and then the women turned and caught sight of Shepherd. Emily started, and Miss Kingsley frowned.

" Good-afternoon," said the latter, after a frigid stare ; " we did not expect you to find us out."

" Eh ? " Claude mumbled stupidly.

" Did—didn't you know about the funeral ? " faltered Emily, looking almost as foolish and embarrassed as he.

" I heard nothing. I'm here only by—chance."

" We naturally wanted to do everything as quietly as possible," said Miss Kingsley. " The child died unbaptized, and Mr. Dumbleton could not read the usual service."

Emily flushed a little.

" I was unfortunately out when it was taken ill," continued the spinster, " or I should certainly not have let the poor little creature leave this world without baptism."

Emily again coloured a trifle ; she needed colour. She was dressed in black, which, though it saved her from her unlucky taste in spots and checks, made her face look unhealthily sallow.

" Oh, Claude," she said after a pause, with something of an effort, " thank you so much for the daffodils. I was too tired to write last night, but, indeed, I'm very grateful to you. I've put them on baby's coffin. I—I hope you don't mind—I had no other flowers."

He was struck by the constraint of her voice, by her whole manner—more uneasy than wretched ; but the next

moment, when he met her eyes, he no longer wondered. A subtle nervous thrill passed through him, and he saw her tremble. For in her eyes he read plainly what her voice had suggested—that friendship could now go no further on the way, and that in his stead was a new guide, the blind leader of the blind.

CHAPTER XVIII

MERE CONJECTURE—BOTH GILMOUR AND CLAUDE QUOTE NIETZSCHE—THE BRAIN OF THREE-AND-TWENTY—RAISINS FARM

AFTER all, it was mere conjecture, Claude told himself as he tramped feverishly home. Who can read the riddle of a woman's eyes? A woman will say one thing to us and mean another. Ah, but not with her eyes. He changed the metaphor, and told himself that juries are loath to convict on circumstantial evidence; none the less, many a man has been hanged on the testimony of a footprint or a blood-stain. Moreover, he had felt the thrill of communicated thought; he was not much of a believer in those psychic powers which proclaim on the housetops of our understanding that which was spoken in the closet of a brother's heart, but he could not think there had been no connection between the physical qualm which he had seen pass through Emily and the mental spasm which had shaken his own soul.

The pity of conjecture is that after we have pursued it to the poles we find ourselves exactly where we were before. It seems subject to the law of biogenesis, for unless fresh witness will absorb it and give it life, it is as incapable of passing into legitimate conviction as the mineral of passing into the vegetable kingdom. When Claude reached Spell Land he was in just the same fret as when he left Easeham.

Possibly Emily loved him, and possibly she did not. For some time he had suspected that her attitude towards him had changed, but what was the precise nature of that change he could not tell. He knew that time, circumstance,

and his own behaviour had to a great extent effaced the memory of his cubbishness, otherwise she would never have made that strange apology of two months ago. The question that remained unanswered was, Given a forgetfulness of his dislikeable conduct, and a complete disillusion where her husband was concerned, would her heart turn to the childhood's comrade who had shared her love with Oliver in years gone by ? He could only guess.

On another road, however, he had made some progress. Reaction had set in, and his day's reckless abandonment was followed by an evening of self-denying ordinance. He did not know that Emily loved him, but her changed manner, the constraint of her voice, and the yearning of her eyes, made the thought possible. He would be on the safe side, and take it for granted that former things had passed away, and that any meeting or communication between them would be attended by danger for her as well as for him. He would see her face no more.

Even Claude realized that this would be difficult, if not impossible, but he itched for self-oblation. His work was on the farm, and he would work as he had never worked before. He remembered how desire had formerly been blunted by denial. If he clung to the Spell Land acreage ; if he moiled and sweated on it ; if he mounted a hobby-horse which would never want to gallop him into Easeham, he might do for himself what circumstance had formerly been good enough to do for him.

At first the plan worked well and, as before, he felt the compensating delights of domestic peace. During the two months following Emily's return he had relapsed into the detestable humour of a winter ago ; but now James once more asked his opinion of stock and tilth, Patrick's arm was again wont to fall familiarly across his shoulders, and though Miss Wellings had received too much confirmation in her opinion that he was " half-baked " to allow herself to be hoodwinked by a few days' sanity, she occasionally melted into graciousness : " I'm glad you've stopped that beastly drinking, dear. You'll never regret it."

He had, however, left one important point out of his calculations. He had reckoned on love growing cold, but he had not considered the possibility of resolution cooling first. Yet this was exactly what happened. Long before his heart had ceased to burn he realized that he was no longer enthusiastic over his reformed ways. Back swung the pendulum, from common sense into the old insanity. He still loved Emily, and no longer feared the dangers attendant on their meeting.

Besides, he told himself, it was impossible for him to stay exiled on the farm. The task he had set himself was nothing short of ludicrous. It encouraged weakness, too—made him a coward as well as a fool. So he eagerly fell in with Patrick's suggestion that he should " see old Apps at the Red Lion " about the Farmers' Club Supper, and marched into Easeham and back again without having so much as caught the flutter of Emily's dress. If anyone had told him that he was disappointed, he would probably have had young Shepherd's fist in his eye.

On his next visit he met her coming out of her cottage-gate, and they exchanged one or two banal remarks, which in his dreams that night were enlarged into an intricate and intimate conversation. He felt vaguely ashamed of this ending to his resolve, but, after all, he told himself, it was folly to imagine that he could live within three miles of Emily and never meet her. The sooner he became used to such meetings the better.

A day or two later he found her sitting under a hedge at Doleham Farm, too hot and weak to walk home with the eggs she had been fetching. Could any man blame him for giving her his arm ?

These meetings were the sap of life which was to absorb conjecture into the higher kingdom of conviction. His doubts became less dark and staggering. All the simple friendliness that had at one time exasperated him was gone. She was all reserve and constraint, no longer eager, but unwilling, to accept his services, stilted of speech and wretched of eye. Sometimes he told himself that such

portents might be only the manifestations of a nature changed by catastrophe; they might even be purely physical in origin, the results of her child-bearing. He told himself that if she really loved him, she would never try to hide love under so transparent a subterfuge as love's antithesis—only a fool hopes to hide tears by pretending to laugh. But he remembered that Emily, though utterly feminine in many respects, had none of her sex's genius for concealment. It was exactly like her to try to hide her life's secret under a tissue of transparencies worthy of the most unstrategical masculine brain.

Her lot during those weeks of middle spring could not have been enviable. Miss Kingsley considered her largely responsible for her own wretchedness. If she had made Oliver's home tolerable, he would not have gone for consolation to another woman; there must have been sins of omission and commission on her part to have goaded him to such weakness; and then her "ideas," those useless, bruising fragments of scrap-iron—were they not enough to drive any man out of doors?

Both Miss Kingsley and David Gilmour had begun to labour for the reconciliation of Oliver and Emily. It appeared that Oliver had once again quarrelled with Mrs. Franklin, and seemed almost anxious to take back his wife. Emily absolutely refused to go to him, either at once, as Miss Kingsley wished, or in the future, after a term of probation, as Gilmour suggested. Claude felt furious with the two schemers, and especially furious with Gilmour, for though his tactics lacked the crudeness of Miss Kingsley's, they were more disillusioning. He had hitherto trusted him for a wise man, but all this talk of "the best course" and "their only chance" seemed to him the most degrading tomfoolery. How dared the minister hope that Emily would ever forgive or forget the heartless injuries she had received? To think that she could ever do so seemed only a degree less insulting than to think she could do so at once.

Of Emily's detestation of the bare idea of again sub-

mitting to her yoke he required no better witness than her preference to live under Miss Kingsley's roof. He thought, and half hoped, that she would apply for another governess's place, but the doctor forbade all idea of that. She had not made a good recovery ; she was languid, given to fits of irritation and depression, incapable of prolonged exertion, requiring careful diet and abundant rest. Dr. Field, however, seeing how great was the strain of her dependence, made no objection to her advertising for pupils at her own house. Towards the end of May negotiations were afoot for her to teach the two little daughters of the new tenant of Broad Land.

Meantime, it was astonishing how many matters of vital importance Claude Shepherd found necessary to transact in Easeham. So often were he and Emily to be seen talking together at the throws or walking together in the lanes that a silent, yet watchful, friend of both took alarm.

" I don't think you and Emily ought to go out so much together," said David Gilmour to Claude one morning. " I've seen you with her every day this week."

" It was purely accidental."

" A little manœuvred, I think."

Claude opened his mouth for an aggrieved retort, but his heart suddenly joined in Gilmour's accusation. " What's the harm of it ? " he faltered.

" People will talk, and that will spoil Emily's chances of getting pupils at her house. You see, it isn't as if you were a friend of her aunt's—she never speaks to you ; she'd be furious with Emily if ever she heard how constantly you and she are together, and she's bound to hear it if people talk."

" But I'm Emily's only friend ; she'd be wretched without me."

" I doubt it."

Claude coloured furiously.

" But I can't help meeting her."

" Sometimes. But you could easily bow to her, make

some little remark, and pass on. The other day I saw you deliberately turn round and go with her."

"She'd be hurt if I suddenly took to avoiding her."

"I think she'd understand, and I mean to have a talk with her, too. I'm rather a pal of hers, you know, and I want both her and you to be happy."

"We can't be that," grumbled Claude, "so there's no use wanting."

"I believe I'm right in saying that it rests with you whether Emily is happy or wretched. Can't you hold your head up like a man instead of moping, and whining, and tempting? Think of all that lies at stake—so much more than when you first let me know you loved her—peace, good name, morality even."

"Morality is the herd instinct of the individual," snarled Claude.

"Oh—Nietzsche!"

"Well," continued the boy truculently, "I dare say he hadn't a rag of your Christianity, but he said some finer things than ever a Christian spoke."

"Yes, he said: 'I conjure thee, cast not away the hero in thy soul.'"

As Claude ruminated matters, after his usual fashion, on his walk home, he realized that some words of the minister's had made a guess a certainty—"moping, whining, tempting." He most surely did not mean that Claude was actively seducing Emily; he meant that his presence was a temptation. Therefore he meant that Emily loved him. Therefore Shepherd's last doubt was gone.

It was as well that Gilmour had exhorted him out of the mouth of his own prophet, for during those first few seconds of conviction he was delirious with joy. For weeks he had been almost certain, but now he had crossed the chasm between almost and quite. Emily loved him; he would lie down that night with thanksgiving. What did it matter that by this knowledge his position was made tenfold more embarrassing and more dangerous? She loved him, he was in her thoughts. . . . Thank God!

—But Gilmour might be mistaken!—The sudden crash back to the uncertainty of three hours ago was a hideous ending of his jubilee. Three hours ago he had told himself that conviction would be torture, now he realized that it was bliss. After all, he had good reason for uncertainty; Gilmour's conjectures were subject to the same law of limitation as his own. Perhaps Emily had confided in him; they had been friends from her childhood, and of late their friendship had been broadened and deepened by her sorrow and his understanding. If he could only find out! It was absolutely imperative that he should know whether Emily loved him or not. He must know, for the planning of his future. If Emily loved him he must avoid her, of course—leave the neighbourhood, perhaps; but if the burning and the craving were all on his side, it would be cruel of him, no matter what gossip might say in its unenlightenment, to deprive her of his friendship. He could easily control his heart, and, next to having her, his chief hope and ambition was to serve her. So worked the brain of three-and-twenty.

It was therefore clearly a matter of duty that he should find out for certain whether Emily loved him or not, and undoubtedly his best plan was to ask Gilmour whether she had confided in him, and, if not, on what he based his conjectures. The minister told him that Emily had not confided in him, and his conjectures were based on grounds similar to Claude's own. Young Shepherd left him in a state of huge dissatisfaction; not only was he in the same plight as when he had gone to Widow's Farm, but he carried away in his memory a certain grim stare. He had signally failed to impress the minister with the necessity for his reading Emily's heart.

Indeed, when the night brought cool reflection, Claude himself began to wonder whether conscience or concupiscence had the largest share in his philosophy. But unfortunately his moral express was still a runaway, and a sudden application of disused and rusty brakes resulted only in some dangerous bumping on the lines. He became

obsessed with the idea that if only he could silence his questionings by either one answer or the other, his troubles and Emily's would be at an end. As long as he was in doubt he would be in danger, but he felt that he could easily grapple with certainties, however deadly. Therefore it was in Emily's interest as well as his own that he should be certain. He saw, too, that nobody had the power to make him certain but Emily herself. If he ceased all intercourse with her, he would lose all chance of certainty. Clearly, in spite of all that Gilmour might think, it was his duty not to fly from her, but to use what opportunities of enlightenment he could snatch, steeling his heart and sharpening his perception, till at last the truth was known. Then his course of action would be clear. . . . When Claude rose the next morning, the first day of the June Idle, he swore an oath before he dressed. He swore that if he ever betrayed his feelings to Emily, or if even without betraying himself he made sure that she loved him, he would leave Spell Land. There was nothing to keep him back but his brothers' false ideas of dignity and his own childish conceit of broad acres. He would spend the rest of his life in retirement, honour, hard work, and tender memories. When he was dead, Emily's letters would be found next his heart, and men would bow themselves with pity and admiration. . . . So worked the brain of three-and-twenty.

It was ironical of Fate to arrange that the next meeting between Claude and Emily should be the first since her return that took place absolutely by chance. Claude was on his way from Tide Barn to Great Night, and was close to the beginning of the short-cut to Easeham, through Raisins Farm, when he saw Emily, white-faced and blue-gowned, just going in through the yard-gate.

"Good-afternoon."

She started, and turned round.

"I never heard you coming." She evidently realized that her discomposure needed some apology.

" I'm going to Great Night. This is a long way for you to walk."

" I had to go to Broad Land."

They had gone through the farm together, and were crossing the field beyond it.

" I mustn't take you out of your way," stammered Emily.

" You aren't—this is my way."

They walked a few moments in silence, and he felt a pang of remorse when he saw how much his presence was disturbing her. After all, there was plenty of time to go to Great Night by the road. Let him play the man, and leave her. As for his precious certainty—was he not already certain ? Did not her bent head, slow speech, and wretched eyes confirm him in that which he had really never doubted ? There remained, therefore, nothing but his oath ; he must leav e her as he had sworn, never see her again. And yet it was the thought of his oath which kept him at her side. As he was to leave her for ever, he must not cut short these few minutes of fellowship, for the last time he would walk beside her through the summer grass, hold her hand at the stile . . .

She was growing restless at the silence, and at last he managed to speak.

" You look poorly, Em."

" Oh, I'm all right."

Claude shook his head. " You ain't."

They walked on for another minute or two, and the village showed two fields away. Claude cursed the little red houses. If only some pretext would arise for loitering ! The meadow in which they stood sloped down to the Brede River, and great clumps of broom drew the bees from the trefoil. In the blue distance was a streak of sea, and from it came the continual moan of a siren.

" Let's sit here," he said. " It's so beautiful, and you look tired."

She looked more than tired ; there was something of haggard anxiety in her eyes.

" I don't think I ought to wait. Aunt expects me back at four."

" It's only half-past three now. Come, Em, we haven't half done our talk."

He laid his hand on her sleeve, but withdrew it, because, at the touch of her warm, thin arm through the cotton, it trembled, and threatened to betray him.

Emily opened her mouth to speak, but for some reason changed her mind, and sank down beside him in the grass.

" I'm glad you can't take a post," said Claude ; " you look downright ill."

" You wouldn't say that if you knew how I longed to get away."

" I do know. But things are going to be better than they used to be ; you won't be quite dependent when you have your pupils."

" I'm not going to have pupils."

" What ! I thought——"

" So did I. But I've been to see Mrs. Carter at Broad Land to-day, and she doesn't think me qualified to teach her children. You see, I haven't been through a single exam, and I know nothing of the newest methods."

" I'm justabout sorry."

" Oh, it's nothing," she said bitterly. " It would have helped a little, but it's independence I want. If only I'd been properly trained I might be supporting myself now, instead of sponging on Aunt Ethel, who's barely got enough to keep herself. Oh, Claude, it's damnable ! "

She seemed to have lost the nervous reserve which had lately characterized her speech, but he could not say that she acted with the old friendliness, for her eyes avoided his.

" I wish to Heaven," she cried, " that I'd been trained in some sensible profession, instead of being set to dabble and drift just as if I were going to inherit five hundred a year. Do you think that any boy with my prospects would have been left to take his chance as I have been ? Just because I'm a woman I'm left to pick and steal my way in the world instead of fighting it.

" I know it's partly my own fault," she continued more calmly, " but I never realized how necessary it was that I should have professional training till it was too late. Uncle Charley would have given it to me, I know, if I had asked him, but Aunt Ethel says that when she was young, women who had to earn their living did so as companions or governesses, or something equally feminine and unsatisfactory. She doesn't seem to realize that nowadays all that is changed, that people won't have their children educated by anyone who hasn't herself had a first-rate education, and that I'm far too dull and sullen for a companion. My only chance is to be a nursery governess, and now, when there are so many trained and certificated lady nurses, people don't want nursery governesses ; besides, they're beginning to see how important a child's first lessons are, and refuse to hand them over to just anyone who's been to school."

Ever since her return he had noticed a certain want of balance and the old control in Emily. These wild repinings were unlike herself ; they told of suffering, sorrow, and humiliation, attacking the mind from the vantage-ground of the body.

" But, Em," he said soothingly, " you couldn't take a post just now, however well you'd been trained and all that —you're ill ; you can't deny it."

" If I'd gone out into the world properly equipped for the battle I've always been aching to fight, I shouldn't be the silly, seedy wreck I am to-day. Because I——"

She stopped suddenly, and for the first time glanced at him.

" Because, if you'd been sure of getting another post after you'd left Mrs. Simons, you'd never have married Mills."

He drew his bow at a venture, with a fine disregard for the flesh that might bleed. He saw the corners of her mouth droop, as if she grieved both at the truth and at the cruelty of his words. She tore up handfuls of the thyme and trefoil on either side of her till her hands were stained and strong-smelling with the turf.

" Isn't that true, Emily ? "

She drew back from him.

" I—I think I must go. I'm sure it's nearly four. Let me get up." His hand was on her knee.

" Have you lost confidence in me ? "

" I shall if you don't let me go. Oh, Claude, do ! Mr. Gilmour said it didn't look well—my—my being with you so much."

She spoke naïvely, but her eyes were full of the guile of a woman's love. He knew that she loved him. He would not have taken her own denial. But the settling of his doubts had quite dropped out of a scheme in which it had never had more than a conventional standing. He was now absolutely free from self-deception, and absolutely, callously, free from fear. He would not let her go.

" Tell me, Emily," he asked, with the careful sternness of one questioning a naughty child, " isn't it true—what I've said ? "

He marvelled at the way she covered up her traces. She tossed her head and laughed.

" How you pester me, Claude ! Of course it's true."

Her sex could not have been better emphasized than by the unfaltering voice in which she spoke.

" Then I was right, two years ago ? "

She struggled to maintain her friendly, careless tone, but in her efforts overplayed the part.

" Oh yes, in a way you were, though not entirely. That wasn't my only reason, but it prepared my mind ; it biassed me ; it helped shut my eyes. I remember how I felt after I had accepted Oliver, and was thinking things over, and what an important place that consideration took in my thankfulness. Of course, I ought to have forgotten all about it. But I didn't ; I kept on saying to myself, ' I shan't have to go back to Aunt Ethel—I shan't have to sponge on Aunt Ethel. Hurrah ! '—and you see how beautifully I'm punished. I'm far worse off than I should have been if I'd gone back—far worse. I've been paid in my own coin, and no discount allowed. That's what comes

of funking things after you've made up your mind to live straight. Lots of girls funk everything every day, and nothing happens to 'em, but just because I funk one single thing—and it wasn't so much funk as pride and cussedness —I'm sent tumbling and writhing to the very bottom of hell. . . ."

There had been a kind of recklessness in her voice during the first few sentences, the craft of her sex driving her to an assumption of ease and carelessness, which had been exaggerated by the clumsiness of the individual unused to feigning. This had been supplanted by a childish note, as if imploring sympathy, and then—no doubt as she realized the extent of her indiscretion—her voice had become broken by little gasps, and sobs, and chokings, and now as he watched her collarless, sunburnt throat he saw her swallow repeatedly.

" Thank you for telling me this. . . . I understand you, Em."

Both their young faces were wooden ; their emotion was to be read only in their throats as they gulped and pulsed. Both were conscious of their danger, but helpless and fascinated as mice under a cat's paw.

" I've said too much," muttered Emily at last.

" You may say what you like to me."

" You're the last person I should have said this to."

" But I want to help you."

" You don't."

" I do."

" You don't, or you wouldn't have let me speak like this. I've been making a fool of myself, giving myself away. Aunt Ethel's right ; I'm a bad lot. But it's no use whin——" And Emily burst into tears.

Her tears were no longer the terror and mystery they had once been to Claude, but he had never seen her cry like this. She sobbed wretchedly, groping for her handkerchief. She struggled to rise, but seemed too weak. She found her handkerchief at last, and held it before her eyes, her whole body trembling.

" Oh, I'm so ashamed."

He felt that it was the accumulated misery of months that he saw finding vent at last—her first suspicions of her husband's infidelity, her last revulsions at his treachery, her dying love, her dead love, her childbirth pangs, her bereaved motherhood, her hopeless dependence, Miss Kingsley's and Gilmour's futile efforts to make her return to an even more maddening humiliation. Poor Em ! All his heart rose in pity, disgust, and craving, and yet he had no right to kiss away her tears. Suddenly she dropped her handkerchief, and her eyes, aloof and inscrutable as an animal's, but swimming in tears like any poor human's, looked into his.

Catch points !

The tears smarted in his own eyes ; the field, the yellow broom, and the blue sky blurred and wavered, but Emily's white face showed more clearly than ever. Why should he not comfort her ? This is not God's law. He took her in his arms.

" Oh, Claude, what have we done ? "

Emily's words were like a cry of " Fire ! " wakening a man in his marriage-bed. She had begun to struggle, too. Her breast was still against his, but her shoulders strained away, and her head fell sideways.

" Oh, Claude, what have we done ? "

The sirens were crooning on the fog-bound sea, and puffs of white mist were coming over the rim of the Brede marshes. His eyes still devoured Emily's white and painfully twitching face, his arms still felt her slight weight as she shrank from him, his nostrils thrilled faintly with the smell of her cotton dress.

" Let me go, Claude."

At last she was free, and sprang to her feet. He jumped up too, and for a moment they stared at each other with round, swimming eyes, then he gripped her arm again. But she wrenched it free.

" For God's sake, leave me alone. . . . I can't bear it ! . . . Oh, Claude, what have we done? "

She broke away, and as he stood watching her blue gown thread through the yellow broom, his ears rang with :

" Oh, Claude, what have we done ? What have we done ? "

CHAPTER XIX

SO HUMILIATING THAT NO FURTHER INDICATION WILL BE GIVEN OF ITS CONTENTS

AFTER all, the question was not so much "What have we done?" as "What shall we do?" and Claude found no answer to it as he tramped down the field towards the Brede River. Half-way he turned to see if Emily were still in sight, but she had disappeared. Then he remembered that he had vowed never to see her again, or, rather, to leave the neighbourhood if love betrayed him. There is, however, little grace in memory, and Claude found himself in much the same position as the man who, lying bruised and battered on a narrow ledge half-way down a precipice, remembers that when he leaned over to gather the flower which caused his fall, he told himself that if he lost his balance he had only to climb to the top again. The top is, perhaps, not very far off, but his bones are broken, and it is more likely that he will roll off his ledge to the bottom than that he will ever climb back to the path.

However, he did his best to struggle into safety. He had recourse to his old plan of hunting for flaws in Emily's character. Surely there had been plenty of 'em evident that day. He had credited her with no skill in feigning, and, indeed, her efforts during the last few weeks to conceal her love had been crude in the extreme. But that afternoon he had seen her shuffle, double, twist, and hide her foot-marks; he had seen the animal's aloofness in her eyes displaced by the stealth and indiscretion of the eternal woman. Just as some quiet household cat when driven to

straits will snarl and bite like any stray of the woods, so a woman at bay will show herself in all the nakedness in which she appeared to Nietzsche—" her flexibility and craft, her tigress claw, her naïveté, her uneducatability." After all, fully half the afternoon's blame should lie by right on her shoulders—her lack of reserve, her rebellion, her appeals for sympathy. . . . He could go no further, for the ghost of her face rose before him, imploring him to cease his journey of condemnation. It was no fair vision ; indeed, Emily had never looked plainer than at the moment when her face, all flushed and swollen with tears, had made him cast away the hero in his soul. He strove to lay the ghost with another quotation from Nietzsche : " She excites pity by appearing more afflicted, more fragile, more necessitous of love and more liable to disillusion than any other creature."

But after all, there was no use trying to shift the burden from the right ass. Emily had sinned, but it was he who had driven her to sin, who had taken advantage of her errors of judgment—one of which had been her trust in him—and used the child's natural craving for sympathy and protection as a weapon with which to wound her soul. He had never hated or despised himself so bitterly as at that moment, when he tramped towards the road at the foot of Easeham Hill. Before then he had often wanted to kick himself, but now he realized grimly that he was not worth kicking. He had given up all intention of going to Great Night ; his shame was as a millstone about his neck, and he walked with bent shoulders and dragging footsteps, tired, though he had not covered seven miles that day. He scarcely knew for what he blamed himself most, for his betrayal of Emily through her most sweet and natural instincts, or for his attempt to lay the blame of it on her shoulders.

" Hullo, Claudie ! "

He started and looked up. Patrick's gig was just crossing Easeham bridge.

" Where are you going ? " asked his brother.

" Home."

" Then you'd better jump up here."

Claude climbed up beside him. He was glad enough to drive, but he did not feel inclined to talk. Fortunately, Patrick was in no need of his conversation. He had a piece of news to impart, of such momentousness that only monosyllables were decent in a commentator.

" Ticehurst of Tanhouse has been left a fortune."

" Oh."

" It's his uncle, gone and died out in California or somewhere, and left him every penny he had. I don't know how much it is exactly, but we were talking about it at the pub over at Westfield, and Hartnell says he reckons it ain't less than five thousand."

" Nice for Dora."

" She's the only one of our family who'll gain by it. Lord, my boy, we shall have to look to ourselves up at Spell Land. They'll be paying off their mortgage, buying up all Doucegrove that's for sale, and going in for elevators, and binders, and shire-horses, and all sorts of things as it was only us could afford to run three months ago."

Claude was silent. Even such a vista of catastrophes had no power to stir his blood.

" The hops are good this year, that's one comfort," continued Patrick, " but that'll help other folk besides us. Look at them goldings of Stodder's—nicely they are. It's all nicely, nicely, about here—those damned Ticehursts, too ! I wonder if James has heard. All this 'ull justabout upset his apple-cart ; he'll have to spend some money, and not be so blasted cautious, if he wants to keep his head up Lord, Claudie ! I've an idea ! "

" What ? " asked Claude, seeing that he expected him to say " What ? "

" Why the hell shouldn't we buy up all the hops round here—and make a corner of 'em, as the American millionaire fellers say ? "

" Simply because you'd be broke if you did," said Claude, roused into languid interest.

" I don't see why we should. There's no fear of us not selling 'em afterwards, and we could make our own price. Now a good year's a cheap year, and a glut's as bad as a dearth, when chaps deal ordinary. But if me and James and you was to buy up all the hops in East Sussex, I reckon we'd——"

" Oh, don't be a fool ! " Claude cried sullenly.

The conversation ended in grunts from Patrick, and allusions to a bear with a sore head. His brother took no notice ; he was so wrapt up in the past that the present seemed unable to reach him—" Oh, Claude, what have we done ? What have we done ? "

Patrick took the *Pink Un* out of his pocket, and was soon sniggering over " Ickle Stories " ; Soda picked his way laboriously up the hot face of the hill. The church bells began to ring for the daily evensong, a melancholy cracked tinkle, symbolically and ironically welcoming back the hero who three hours ago had set out in a home-made halo of renunciation, and now returned bareheaded, having left his halo in a woman's lap.

All the way through the village he stared at his boots, for fear that he might see Emily.

" There's Mr. Gilmour waving to you," said Patrick, but he felt as little inclined to meet Gilmour's eyes as Emily's.

They passed the last of the Cackle Street cottages, and Soda swung into a protesting trot. They came within sound of the smith's hammer at Broad Oak.

" I'm as dry as a wooden god," said Patrick.

Claude immediately read the secret of his great bovine eye, fixed on the signboard of the Fuggle Hop Beerhouse.

" Shall we stop at the Broad Oak ? "

" Gammon and spinach ! There's nothing there but gaffers and skittles. I'm for the Fuggle Hop " ; and Patrick hitched his reins to the whip-stand.

Claude realized vaguely that he was his brother's keeper. His family had watched him more or less carefully ever since his memorable outburst, but of late their vigilance had been relaxed as a work of supererogation. He had kept

wonderfully steady for the last two years—the drastic treatment to which the doctor had subjected him was no doubt accountable for this ; on one occasion he had come home a trifle fuddled, had tried to kiss Miss Wellings, and gone to bed in his boots, but on the whole his conduct had been exemplary. Surely the danger was past. At any rate, any opportunity for interference was past, Patrick having, during his brother's struggles with a sorely battered conscience, taken himself into the bar.

Claude jumped down and followed him ; he suddenly saw a certain attraction in that bar—in its fuggy atmosphere and unclean floor, even in the two men who were talking at once to Patrick. They were smallholders in the Udimore district, beloved of Pat, abhorred of James. Claude nodded to them as he ordered his beer. Beer was the very thing he wanted.

The landlord's daughter took a used tumbler off the counter, dipped it in a basin of water, in which, judging by its colour and consistency, various other tumblers had recently been immersed, filled it at the tap, and handed it to him with a smirk. He drank ; the ale had none of the mellowness of that he drank at the Broad Oak or at home ; it had a sub-acid taste, which he found unpleasant at first, but more tolerable at a second draught. " I shall have to be careful," he said to himself, remembering Patrick's fate, " but it's certainly doing me good."

It always took at least two glasses of the Broad Oak ale to make him feel even hopeful ; at the end of the third glass he would experience a certain measure of satisfaction, but it required a quart to lay memory and regret. He was in good spirits at the end of his second glass at the Fuggle Hop, and a third and a fourth opened hitherto unimagined vistas of alleviation. He felt very hot and very excited—effects never produced by the mellow ale of home—but he certainly had taken the best means of driving away the pain at his heart. Why, he felt rather a gay dog. Would you, sir, of Little School-house, guess that I've just kissed my neighbour's wife ? He became important ; fortunately,

the conversation, being hitched on to the Ticehurst affair, did not allow him to be indiscreet. He swung off the fourth glass, and suddenly realized that the landlord's daughter was very pretty, and would have told her so had he not encountered unexpected difficulties in the English language. The fifth glass . . . " You, sir, of Little School-house, are laughing at me, and you, sir, of Jordan's, are drunk." " What ! I drunk ! . . . You liar ! . . . I'll teach you to insult a gentleman. . . ."

Claude had a vague impression of throwing off his coat, and afterwards, as Patrick's low companions did nothing but cackle, flinging half his sixth glass at somebody. Then there was a scrimmage. " Lor' ! " shrieked the landlord's daughter. " Faather ! someone come and chuck 'em out, do ! " . . . A stunning blow, close to his left eye . . . mist . . . the sudden crack of broken glass under his foot . . . he found himself lurching against the wall, the blood dribbling down his cheek, while Patrick, almost equally unsteady, swayed in front of him, deliberately licking his handkerchief and trying to clean his brother's face with it.

The mists parted . . . he was back in the gig, but Patrick was not driving. Mr. Batt of School-house held the reins. Something was wrong ; his head ached as if it would split, and he felt terribly thirsty—strange, for he must have had a glass or two at the Fuggle Hop. Moreover, he did not seem to have the right number of legs. He counted them carefully—one, two, three. What had happened ? He counted them again ; still three. Ah, the middle one was not his own, for he was sitting on Patrick's knee, and one of his legs was thrust out between Claude's. . . . Batt surely was driving very erratically ; they were nearly in the hedge that time. He must be drunk. He, Claude, had better take the reins. " No, you don't ! " and he felt too ill to insist.

By the time they reached Spell Land he was better ; that is to say, he knew that he was drunk. Batt helped him and his brother out of the trap, and propelled them towards the gate. Patrick, however, insisted on taking

charge of Soda, and on ordering Batt off his premises. He walked more steadily than Claude, though he had drunk more.

"I'll jus' put 'im in's stall, and go res' a bit," he mumbled, as Soda led him towards the stable-door.

As for Claude, he saw a bucket of water standing by the pump, and after overshooting it once or twice, managed to plunge his head into it. He drank about a pint, and felt better. He realized that he ought to go to bed. A cold blast of shame was beginning to part the fumes that clouded his thought. He was drunk; he knew it; he had drunk himself sick at the Fuggle Hop Beerhouse, and before that he had done something even more terrible, he felt sure of it, though he could not remember exactly what it was.

"Mus' Claude!" called a distant voice, "is that you in the yard? Prince Harold's home from Vine Hall, and Mus' James told me to ask you to give un a rub down. I'm busy with Pansie, so I can't see to un myself."

"Right," Claude mumbled. Well, he must do his best. He was so used to the curry-comb and the buffeting-cloth that he felt he could wield either of them even under present limitations. It did not occur to him that he ran less risk of betraying his condition if he left the horse ungroomed. After all, he was not so very drunk. He had found the stable-door with comparatively little trouble. He was only a little screwed, and it would soon pass off. But oh, what a beast he felt!

Soda was in his stall, fully caparisoned, Patrick nowhere to be seen. Claude went up to Prince Harold. He looked very big and black—in fact, he loomed; and young Shepherd's distances seemed all wrong, for when he thought himself a yard off he suddenly ran into him.

He picked up a handful of straw and twisted it; he would only rub him down. . . . Good Lord! what had he led him out of the stable for? Surely he had not finished grooming him, and here they were, both of them, in the yard. Had he meant to lead him to the pond? Hang it all! He had better go to bed. But he must put him some-

where first. Where was the stable? A door suddenly glided in front of him. This must be it. He led Prince Harold in—it was not the stable; there were cows in it—but it would do as well. Lord! What was that? The stallion gave a plunge, and Claude went reeling against the wall.

After a struggle he recovered his balance, and tried to investigate the reason for the commotion. He realized that he had trodden on the handle of a pitch-fork, and one of the prongs had entered Prince Harold's hock just above the pastern. Here was a pretty state of things. What was to be done? . . . Elliman's. The word shot across his brain, and he welcomed it. Elliman's! Why, of course, the very thing. It was kept in the medicine-cupboard in the harness-room; he would get some at once.

He groped his way along the cowhouse wall to the harness-room door. The place was empty, and he steered for the medicine-cupboard. What endless rows of bottles! He stared in perplexity at them as they swayed. How was he to pick one out of such a huge and interchanging lot? And how was he to know which was Elliman's? Here was a pretty tangle. He put out his hand and groped along the shelf, then he reached up, and made a snatch at a venture at the top shelf. Crash! Something struck his head, and down he fell with another crash. Clouds of red mist floated round him. Crash! Crash! More bottles falling. It's a shame to hit a man when he's down. . . . A struggle to rise, a tumble backwards, gathering darkness, a vision of Miss Wellings looming over him, then a blank. . . .

CHAPTER XX

FAME COMES AS A FOE—JONAH—THE PRICE OF RED POTTAGE

HE was not allowed to forget it. Neither conscience nor Miss Wellings would hear of such a contingency. The latter seemed unaware of the reminders of the former—to say nothing of such aids to memory afforded by a cut on the face, a bruise on the temple, and a headache which lasted a week—and acted as if it depended on her entirely whether the recollection of his vileness and its punishment sank into oblivion, or served as a check to future atrocities. She started a new era by it, and events were dated by their precedence or antecedence to " the day Claude made a beast of himself."

Those were dismal times. He was in disgrace with his family, cut off from sympathy when at last he was ready to welcome it in homespun. James could not forgive him the wound on Prince Harold's foot, even though the vet. looked upon it as of little consequence ; neither could he forgive his disgrace at the Fuggle Hop. After all, it was only the climax to conduct which had long tried him, and which he felt was depreciating the name of Shepherd just when it so badly needed exalting over the name of Ticehurst. He had taken the Ticehurst affair bitterly to heart ; indeed, there was now an open breach between the families, causing Dora endless struggles with divided interests. Patrick still seemed obsessed by the idea of making a fortune by a corner in hops, and " knocking Ticehurst into a cocked hat," but James only snarled at his suggestions. Both he and Miss Wellings held Patrick guiltless in the

matter of the Fuggle Hop ; indeed, his share in the business was added to Claude's burden. " Pore Mr. Patrick ! to be led astray by you, just when he was getting on so sober," snapped Miss Wellings, who had always been ready to look on Patrick's weaknesses from the family point of view.

That was the month of weaning. The lambs were taken from the ewes, and for days the fields were Ramah. If the dumb brutes suffer so, thought Claude, what must be the lot of human mothers when their children are taken from them ? He wondered whether Emily had cried much when her child died ; she seemed to cry far more easily now than when she was at school. Perhaps she was not so wretched as the ewes, for if her child had lived, it would have been an additional barrier between her and the comparative independence of a governess's life. As things were, she would be free to go out into the world and earn her living as soon as her health allowed. But when would her health allow ? And even if she disobeyed the doctor's orders, no one would give work to this woman, who was sick when she ate, and staggered when she walked. She must stay at home, on scanty pastures, like the ewes ; perhaps one day she would forget her sorrow, even as they forgot.

It was on the tenth of June, or, according to the new reckoning, a week after Claude made a beast of himself, that Blackman told James he was anxious about Prince Harold. The wound on his hock was beginning to heal, and the vet. had not been round for a couple of days, but his face had a strange drawn expression, and he held his head stiffly, with the nose poked out and the neck ewed. His breathing, also, seemed difficult.

James at once sent a plough-boy for the vet. He was always inclined to be nervous about Prince Harold, of whom he was more proud than of all the rest of his stock put together. The Prince had that spring taken a first prize at the Sussex County Show, and James had paid his price twice over in prize-money and hiring fees. As for Claude, he felt anxious lest the animal's condition should be due to the wound he had received through his carelessness.

The vet. was some time coming, and during the interval the brothers' anxieties and Prince Harold's symptoms increased. The horse stood with outstretched limbs, his back hollowed and his tail raised. Williams and Captain Hayes were taken down from the bookshelf and consulted with unusual twitchings of the face. In the hearts of all three was a terrible suspicion which they dared not put into words.

The vet. arrived, and with Patrick, James, and Blackman went into the stables. Claude followed them, for Prince Harold was, after all, his property as well as his brothers', but he was not as one of them ; he stood in the background, a guilty, uneasy wretch to whom no one spoke.

The examination did not last long.

" Ah ! " said the vet., " traumatic tetanus."

There was silence.

" Are you quite sure, Mr. Blazier ? " stammered James at last.

" Oh, perfectly," grinned Blazier, with unfailing cheerfulness. " Ewe neck, flanks tucked up, abdominal breathing—all the symptoms, you see. Must say such a case is extremely rare in these parts."

" What's to be done ? " asked Patrick.

" Well, he must be slung as soon as possible, and the stable must be cleared, and kept perfectly quiet. I might block his ears with wax, in fact. I'm told it's been recommended in human practice."

" Do you think he'll recover ? "

" Er—well, the symptoms have come on rather fast, which is always a bad sign. But we must hope for the best, and do our best. I'll apply a warm fomentation to the wound, and we can give him belladonna to modify the paroxysms. He must be fed, too, poor brute ! for he don't lose his appetite, though he can hardly swallow—gruel, milk and eggs, and a little mash put between his back teeth. It's an interesting case."

So, indeed, it proved—to the whole neighbourhood.

The rumour flew from farm to farm—" Shepherd s Prince Harold's dying of lockjaw "—and thenceforward all roads led to Spell Land. It was as in the days of Hobbs's Drayman : carts, gigs, and waggons came to the gate in an endless stream ; the bar of every inn from Northiam to Hastings, and from Robertsbridge to Rye, flowed with gossip and condolatory sherry. The Shepherds were as famous as the heart of man could wish, but they took their glory sadly. As for Claude, he skulked and hid like any vagrant. He dared not meet his brothers. He either ate his meals after they had left table, or he did not eat them at all. During the next three days he could not have spoken more than a dozen words to any living soul. One of the most terrible circumstances of the case was his utter helplessness to atone for past guilt by present service. Prince Harold's only chance of life lay in absolute quiet ; the vet. visited him twice a day, gave him such food as he could take, and tried to alleviate his agonies with belladonna, but no one else was allowed near the stable. Claude skulked about the fields and woods, shy of work and shy of men, continually haunted by the memory of the Prince as he had last seen him, his gigantic triumphal limbs all cramped and agonized, his arched neck ewed like any poor broken cab-horse's, and his eyes full of a piteous terror and anguish. Sometimes in his sleep he saw those eyes, and they asked him far more terribly than his brothers, Miss Wellings, or his conscience had ever asked : " Why were you drunk last week ? "

It was on the evening of the third day, and Claude was crossing the yard. Blazier was in the stable, and Patrick and James were standing outside it. Just as he drew near them the door opened, and he felt bound to wait and hear the news.

" Well ? " asked James, in the same half-hopeful, half-querulous tone that he had asked, " Well ? " for the last three days.

Blazier put up his hand to his throat meaningly, but the brothers stared, unable, or perhaps unwilling, to understand

" Severe spasms of the larynx—he's gone."

There was silence. Then suddenly Patrick hurried away. James still stood staring at the vet., and so did Claude.

" I should like to make a post-mortem," said Blazier, rubbing his hands ; " it's a most interesting case, as I've said before, and not one that has come much within my experience."

He took himself and his hideous cheerfulness back into the stable, and James followed him. Claude turned to slink away, but was checked by a voice calling to him over the wall :

" How is he ? "

Hobbs of Winter Land had driven up in his trap, and spoke in a tone of chastened expectancy.

" He's dead."

Out poured Hobbs's condolences. Claude respected the man ; at least, he was struggling with his exultation. James came out of the stable, and in for Hobbs's fag. " It's a middling bad time for you to have lost him, too. Ticehurst was telling me only the other day that now he's got all that tin he means to do a little horse-breeding of his own, and keep a fust-rate shire stallion."

" I shall buy another brute as good as this," said James in a voice that sounded very unlike James's.

" Still, it'll be a bad thing to have rivals, especially in a place like this, where there's never much work for an expensive sire. Ticehurst 'ull have the start of you, too——I believe he's already half settled about his brute. Your Prince's death 'ull come as a godsend to him. . . ." Hobbs shook his head and sighed. " It's a heavy loss, a horse like that," he continued. " I've lost one myself, so I know. I don't expect you'll start again, Shepherd, when you've thought it over."

" I don't care a snap for Ticehurst," said James ; " he may spend as much on pedigree horses as he likes. I can hold my own ; we ain't broke yet at Spell Land."

He continued the conversation in tones of stolid indifference and studied politeness. Claude would have slipped

away if Hobbs had not persisted in addressing half his condolences to him. Just before he gathered up the reins he made a sly allusion to " a drop too much."

No sooner had he gone than James swung round on his brother. Claude had never seen such a look in his eyes. They fairly blazed, and his hands were clenched against his sides.

" Well, sir ! " he cried thickly.

Claude held his tongue.

" I—I hope you're pleased with yourself at last, now that you've dragged your brothers' name in the mud, and made yourself a laughin'-stock, and ruined one of our prettiest bits of business."

" It ain't ruined," mumbled the boy obstinately ; " we can buy another shire horse."

" Yes. Spend another hundred pound, just when we've bought a hay elevator and two new waggons, and I don't know what else besides ! There's such a heap of spare cash in farmin', ain't there ? Profits go hundreds of pounds above expenses, don't they ? Oh, it's nothin' to lose a prime shire horse, that had taken prize-money at half a dozen shows, and was worth twice as much as when I fust bought him ! You're surprised to see me kickin' up such a fuss. You think I ought to be pleased when folks say I'm a godsend to a chap as has spent his days in tryin' to cut me out."

The torrent of James's sarcasm was choked by his rage. For a moment Claude half thought that he would strike him.

" I dare say Hobbs was only lying," he muttered.

" Not he ! I heard rumours of 'em startin' breedin' at Tanhouse almost as soon as I heard they'd got that £ s. d. They always were ambitious about their colts. I didn't fret much over it, for, says I, I've a horse as they can't beat ; but now, thanks to you and your disgustin' habits——"

" It's the Lord's doing," snarled Claude, driven to use his claws.

" Yes," said James unflinchingly, " it is. But why has He done it ? It's all along of you. You're a Jonah, you are, with your unchristian ways and your high-falutin' airs, and your beastly drunkenness. The sooner you turn out of this place the better ; we'll never have any luck while you're here. A lot of use you are to us, and be damned to you ! " James flung an anxious glance at some pedigree pigs in a sty close at hand. " You're a Jonah, you are," he continued, as the grunting remained untroubled—" a curse, sir, and you'd better clear out. Don't speak to me ; I'm sick of your noise, and of your face too. Take yourself off, and don't let me see you till to-morrow—take yourself off ! I'm sick of you."

He had driven the spirit out of Claude. The boy tried to speak, but his brother's unflinching eye choked the words back, and he staggered away from him, hiding his face with his arm, as he had sometimes done as a child when James had beaten him.

All that night he was conscious of shame. In his dreams he was a wastrel and an outcast, a traveller along dark, lonely ways, and in brief bitter moments of wakefulness the sense of his ignomy almost amounted to terror. In one of these it flashed across his mind that Emily would perhaps have heard he had been drunk. All the neighbourhood knew it, which meant that Miss Kingsley would be almost sure to hear it on her parochial visitations, and Miss Kingsley would be only too pleased to tell Emily.

It may seem strange that a ten-days' stale carouse should weigh much heavier than when it was fresh and hot in the conscience. The fact was that Claude had not till then fully felt the consequences and, like most men, he was inclined to measure events by their consequences, with the result that his idea of degrees in wrong-doing approximated to that of an injudiciously punished child, who brackets together the tearing of a frock and the telling of a lie. His drunkenness loomed darker that night than all

that had gone before it ; he did not realize that it was in itself a consequence, the natural effect of a blacker, subtler wrong that had been committed in a field near Raisins Farm. On the contrary, the grossness of his intemperance was so overwhelming that the sin, which was not gross, but savoured of romance and the delicacy of human sorrow, showed almost as an oasis in his desert of self-abomination.

He woke, according to custom, at five, but he felt that there could be no morning work for him. He drew the clothes over his head to shut out light and sound, and at last fell into a heavy, unrestful sleep, from which he did not wake till nearly half-past seven. He could lie abed no longer, so he rose and washed himself, and, putting on some of his clothes, went out on the landing. The house smelled appetizingly of hot bacon, and he felt terribly hungry, but he would not go down till the coast was clear. He hung over the banisters, listening to the common household sounds, his heart full of a dull, ridiculous envy. The kitchen-door was open, and he could hear the bacon fat hissing ; he heard Miss Wellings scolding the servant, to an accompaniment of clattering plates and clinking spoons He heard his brothers come in, and he drew back lest they should see him. Then came a more continuous rattle and clink, with the clatter of knives and forks ; he almost thought he could hear Patrick drinking his tea. Then someone shut the door, and the sounds came more faintly, with, as at last appetites began to be satisfied, the hum of conversation. The house was so badly built that he could catch a word or two now and then. Prince Harold was evidently the chief topic.

It was all ridiculous. There he leaned over the banisters, sniffing at the fainting smell of eatables, like a pantomime parody of the peri at the gate of paradise. There never was anything more stupid or crammed with bathos ; and yet he had never so miserably realized the gulf he had put between himself and honest folk as then, when he heard them at their breakfast, and knew that if he came into

the room, conversation would cease and looks become severe.

A large tom-cat came tiptoeing upstairs, and rubbed against his legs with an air of sickening affability. He was grateful even for his caresses, though he knew that mentally puss was entirely detached, and that he owed his favour to some association of his negligible self with milk and sardines. The kitchen-door opened, and Miss Wellings came out, leaving James and Patrick alone together. Claude still stood listening to the hum of their voices : they were talking earnestly, and sometimes he heard " Ticehurst " and " horse-breeding " mentioned, and pretty often " hops." A sudden longing to be received back into the councils of the farm, to beg his brothers' pardon, to be brought again into the once despised but now worshipped ark of their goodwill, overpowered him, and nearly forced him to the stair-head. He snatched up the cat and rushed back into his room. Someone should care for him—the cat should care for him ; he must have some token of man's or beast's regard, or hang himself. He rolled with him on the bed, cuddling him and stroking him till his hands were a network of scratches, and he had nearly lost his left eye. The cat alighted on the floor spitting, arched, and bristling ; but seeing that Claude had no wish to continue his endearments, he grew calm, and trod with dignity and aloofness to the door. Claude almost admired him. Here was a being who preferred to be alone, to go his own way without a brother.

He went again to the stair-head. The conversation still continued, and seemed entirely confined to hops, judging by the constant repetition of " goldings " and " fuggles." Was Patrick, then, recommending his wild-goose plan to James's desperation ? Claude stole back into his room. He wished they would leave the kitchen, the wind was moaning so horribly upstairs.

In another quarter of an hour he went out once more. All was silence, and he wondered if he might go down. He decided to do so, for he realized that Miss Wellings would

soon be coming up to make his bed, and he would face the whole household rather than Miss Wellings. Besides, he was mortally hungry.

He went downstairs and opened the kitchen-door. The room was not empty: James and Patrick sat each side of the hearth, both rather strangely occupied in reading, Patrick a newspaper, and James a boy's story-book. Directly Claude came in Patrick rose and went out at the side-door; James stayed where he was, without lifting his eyes.

The table had been cleared, so he began to hunt for food. Though he had lived in the house twenty-three years, he had no idea where anything was kept, and there were several abortive cupboard-openings before he at last discovered half a loaf of bread. James's presence embarrassed him horribly; his silence was worse than any abuse, and more than once he was tempted to bolt from the room, and was restrained only by the thought that such behaviour would but add to his ignominy. He found a knife, and sat down at the table.

"There's jam in that cupboard."

James jerked his thumb towards the cupboard by the fireplace, which Claude had hitherto let alone, on account of its proximity to his brother. The dry bread was already beginning to make him choke. He went over to the cupboard, and took down a pot of the cheap, over-sweetened jam they used to eat at Spell Land. He was still childishly fond of sweet things, and he thought the stuff delicious, ladling it on to his bread as if he expected to drown his sorrows in glucose.

He was half-way through his meal when there was a movement behind him, and the next moment the advertisement sheet of the local paper appeared between him and the loaf. He stared at it in surprise till James pointed with a dark finger-nail.

"To let. Near Benenden, Kent. Gentleman's pleasure farm, known as Little Nineveh. Fourteen acres, paddock,

and orchard. Rent, £36. House furniture, with live and dead stock, including 200 head of poultry, incubator, 2 cows, and fine sow in farrow, £60. Apply John Body, Wittersham."

"Well?" said James.

"You think I ought to take it?" Claude asked in the subdued voice of a child who is spoken to kindly, but knows he is still in disgrace.

"I think you might give it a trial. I really don't see how you can stay on here—I shouldn't think you'd want to—and both Pat and I 'ud like you to be nicely settled. You've looked over this place, and found it all right, haven't you?"

"It's unaccountable lonely."

"That won't hurt you. Of course, me and Pat 'ull do all that's reasonable in the way of £ s. d. We don't want to treat you hardly, but stay here you can't, sir, and that's flat."

Claude felt the hot crimson mounting to his hair, and he durst not meet James's eyes.

"It's sad to think," continued his brother, "that a Shepherd should ever become a small-holder, but I don't see what else you can do for yourself. You've justabout knocked up Pat and me. I'm so fair upset about you that I've scarce done a stroke of work this mornun. I dare say you were surprised to find me settin' here readin'. It was only because I hoped that story as Blackman lent me 'ud help me think of somethin' else."

There was a peculiar noise in Claude's throat.

"Perhaps it's our own fault that you've turned out so badly. You were kind of mixed in your bringin' up. We hoped to do well for you by sendin' you to learn your lessons with your uncle, and afterwards to a decent school, but we'd much better have let you go to the National. As things are, you're too stuck up and high-falutin' for our style of life, and yet, Heaven knows, you ain't a gentleman."

Claude found his bread very hard to swallow.

" I'm right down sorry," continued James, " that you're too old for me to put you across my knee, for, 'pon my word, that 'ud do you more good than all the ' fresh starts ' that ever was."

The next day James and Claude went over to Little Nineveh. The tenant who, six months before, had shown young Shepherd the nakedness of his little farm was dead. His widow was disposing of the remainder of the lease at an attractively low rental, and James, after a careful inspection of the house and stock, pronounced them worth the price demanded. Claude was glad of his advice ; indeed, as he walked over the acreage, beside his capability, the thought of his own ignorance fairly beat him down. James's secure knowledge, his rapid calculations, dwarfed into insignificance his brother's experience and powers. Claude was so accustomed to the support of better-informed and better-balanced minds that he shrank from entire dependence on his own discretion. Six months ago he would no doubt have entered on his new life in a spirit of foolhardiness, but by now all the spirit had been beaten out of him, all the bumptiousness, and all the enterprise.

James and Patrick offered him the loan of two hundred pounds, to be paid back in instalments during the next five years. There would be heavy initial expenses ; moreover, the land was in a poor condition, and, till he had got it into something like order, he would require the help of an extra hand ; he had also engaged a girl to cook and scour for him daily, and attend to the poultry-yard.

His brothers seemed anxious to treat him with the most scrupulous fairness. They considered that they owed him their help, their father having left his youngest son entirely to their generosity and judgment ; but he realized that they did not think it right to assist him as if he were leaving them in honour. He was entitled to equity, and no more.

He was to enter into possession of his new domain on the summer quarter-day. The house was furnished, and

had been put into repair for the last tenant, so there was no need for waiting. In spite of his apprehensions, Claude wished the next fortnight over. Though his brothers treated him with an odd, unexpected tact, and Miss Wellings' contempt was entirely confined to sniffs, he found the days pass wretchedly enough. Spell Land was no longer his—he had voluntarily relinquished all share in its management and its great name. No doubt, if everything went well, his finances would be bettered by the change, and he would certainly have the largesse of independence. But he knew that he should fall in status: a small-holder is a being far lower on the agricultural scale than a yeoman farmer, even if the latter have only a small interest in the farm whose waggons bear his name. The waking and roosting noises of the yard, the view from his bedroom window, were a daily agony. He could no longer walk through the wide fields, the hop-gardens, the woods, the pens, the stables, saying, "This is mine." He no longer had a share in those solemn councils for the honour and fruitfulness of the land. James and Patrick now talked over these matters with no reference to their brother —without a thought, perhaps, of how bitter their conferences sounded to him as he sat with his book, or his paper, or his folded hands, no longer privileged to speak.

The farm, too, seemed to be entering on a new and dangerous epoch in its career. Day after day brought the news of some fresh glory at Tanhouse.

"Ticehurst's tarred his oasts," was Blackman's note which started the scale. Then came Ticehurst's shire horse, then the news that he had given notice of redemption to his mortgagee, then that he had bought the adjoining farm of Doucegrove, beating Spell Land by forty acres.

All this favoured Patrick's attempts to force James into unknown territories of enterprise. Claude obtained a rough knowledge of their plans, though he was never consulted. Their ambition was to crush the Ticehursts for ever by establishing a sort of two-power standard, and, as a first step in this direction, Pat's famous hop gamble ran a

fair chance of taking place. James was not the man to take kindly to speculation, but there seemed no other way of making a large sum, and a large, even enormous sum was necessary if his Olympus was to be secured from the Pelion piled on Ossa of Tanhouse and Doucegrove. After all, there seemed very little risk in the undertaking, and it would enable them to consider with greater definiteness a vaguer, more ambitions project, which was to start horse-breeding on a large scale and "cut out" Ticehurst completely.

These plans, though they were by no means definite, gave Claude some uneasiness. They were such a departure from precedent that they seemed bound up with disaster, but he dared make no protest. Rather than that Tanhouse should usurp Spell Land's greatness, James would violate every instinct, and cast prejudice, even caution, to the winds. Besides, Claude vaguely considered himself responsible for the Ticehurst's activities. As it happened, only their shire horse need have been on his conscience, but the household put down all its humiliation to Prince Harold's death, and Shepherd, in his shamefacedness, had come unconsciously to adopt the household's point of view, and to trace back his brothers' anxious, ageing faces to "the day Claude made a beast of himself."

CHAPTER XXI

FAREWELLS—THE LANDING-RAIL—THE PLATFORM—THE "BALLAD OF READING GAOL"

THE stress of these events had for a day or two shut off the remorse and the anxiety of love, just as a halfpenny, if close enough to the eye, will blot out the sun. But during the fortnight that followed them, back came Love adust to his bishopric, with pining and burning, delight and regret.

A few days before his departure, Claude began to fret about how he should say good-bye to Emily. His better self advised him not to say it at all, but his stronger self told him that he could not leave her without a word. He compromised by deciding to write her a letter, and some of his lonely tramps were spent in pondering what he should say. He could not tell her, as he might have done had he been less weak, that he was leaving the neighbourhood for her sake. He sometimes asked himself whether, if his brothers had not practically kicked him out of doors, he would have fulfilled his oath and left Spell Land. It was a question he was never able to answer.

He said good-bye to Dora the night before he went. Her attitude was constrained at first, but after a while she softened, and confided to him her loathing of the Shepherd-Ticehurst war.

"We'll all end by busting ourselves, that's what we'll do. Father-in-law 'ull do something showy, and then James 'ull go one better, then we'll cut him out, then he'll cut us out, and so on till we're all of us broke."

"It's wretched," said Claude, "especially for you, and I'm afraid it's mostly my fault."

"Reckon it is. James cud have stood it better if he hadn't lost his Prince Harold. I never saw a man so proud of anything as he was of that horse. And just to think, all through you . . . But I won't go jawing you; I reckon you get quite enough of that at home. Still, I must say I'm surprised you should have turned out so badly; you used to be such a dear little chap."

The next morning Claude woke when the sky was neither clear nor dark, and felt the heavy presage of farewells. They would be farewells to places rather than to men, and he began them early, by leaning out of the window and watching the poplar rustling in the wind, while the dawn moved like a white cloth over the face of the pond. The sound of distant trotting hoofs came to him now and then, and soon the first crowing of cocks, both distant and at hand. It was not going to be a fine day; the air was damp and thick with the smell of rain.

Breakfast was a subdued, uncomfortable meal. He could see that everyone was sorry for him, but he did not feel particularly grateful to anyone. He ate voraciously, scowling when he was spoken to. He was thinking of what he should say to Emily in the letter he meant to write directly the meal was over. That letter worried him. For the last week or two he had not been such a stranger to himself as formerly: he had become acquainted with some of his own tricks, and had lost all that pretty trust in himself which had led him into so many scrapes. Six weeks ago he would have said good-bye to Emily in person; now he knew what was at the bottom of the many excellent reasons his heart suggested for such a course. Moreover, he knew why he had not written his letter the day before, and given it to Sarah to hand in. The knowledge did not help him as he wrote it after breakfast.

He wrote it four times, for he strove for the middle way, the hardest way in the world. He felt that he could not leave out all reference to that terrible afternoon at Raisins Farm, and yet he hardly knew how to mention it. He started with the idea of begging her pardon, but abandoned

it as soon as he tried to carry it out. When he came to the point, he realized, strange as it seemed, that he did not want her pardon. The first draft of the letter he tore up because it was too cold, the second because it was too ardent, and the third because it was too despairing. The fourth he let stand only because there was no time to write a fifth.

The carrier's cart had called for his box, and as he hastily scrawled the address on the envelope, he realized that the only thing which mattered was that he was leaving Emily. The farm and all the plans and activities bound up with it suddenly showed no more than a web of petty ambition and petty intrigue from which he was well disentangled. His brothers were good fellows, but piteously unnecessary to the scheme of his existence. Of Dora he saw little enough as things were ; besides, she was always whining. No doubt this change of heart helped him through some leave-takings that might have been most bitter. James shook him by the hand, and asked him to write and tell him how he fared ; Miss Wellings told him that it would not help him to get drunk if he felt lonely ; and Patrick recommended him to marry, " and then I don't see as you need be lonely, and you won't have to pay a servant-gal, neither." " If he marries," said James, " I'm sorry for his wife."

These were practically all the good-byes to be said. The moody, erratic conduct of the last two years had lost him what friends he possessed among the neighbouring farmers' sons. He went into the yard, and shook hands with the men. Blackman was inclined to be facetious : he had often been drunk himself, but he had never had the misfortune to kill a pedigree stallion. A dairy girl waved her hand, said " Good-bye, Muster Claude," and giggled. That was all.

He was to bicycle to the station. He shot past the carrier's cart before it reached Broad Oak, and reflected with satisfaction that he had plenty of time. His newly acquired self-knowledge told him why he was so pleased to be in good time : it does not take so very long to leave

a letter at a door; but suppose he should be so unlucky as to see Emily . . .

He reached the village shortly before nine. He realized that he would have time to make the circuit by Widow's Farm and say good-bye to Gilmour, but he also realized that he did not want to say good-bye to him. He had avoided him ever since the day of his twofold failure, and somehow that morning he felt less inclined than ever to meet his eyes.

Suppose he should be so unlucky as to see Emily. . . .

He dismounted at Miss Kingsley's cottage in the Cackle Street, and rang the bell. There was no answer, so he rang again. Still no answer. He had better slip the letter under the door. But it might be pushed under the mat and never be found.

He opened the door.

"Anyone in?" he called.

He could see an open trunk upstairs on the landing. He wondered whose it was.

"Anyone in?" he called again, a little louder.

A door opened, and Emily came out on the landing, carrying a pile of white underclothes.

There's a coincidence!

For a moment they stared at each other without speaking.

"I've brought you a letter," said Claude at last.

Emily leaned her arm over the landing-rail and took it.

"Did you know I was going?"

She nodded.

"Do you know why?"

She nodded again.

"I—I was drunk, Em." He felt that he could not leave her without his shrift.

"I know."

"I've behaved like a beast and a fool."

"I dare say."

There was another silence. Emily began to put her clothes into the trunk. The movement roused him.

"Where are you going?"

Emily laughed. He stared at her, and she laughed again—fairly leaned her head on the landing-rail and laughed.

"I'm going back to Oliver," she said, in a choked voice.

"Great God!"

He took a couple of strides up the stairs, but she waved him back.

"Please stay at the bottom. I'll tell you all you want to know."

Her words dumbfounded him, and the icy calmness with which she spoke them, so different from her child's pathos and woman's passion at Raisins Farm, made them unutterably appalling.

"Em, why are you going to him? How dare you go to him?"

"Don't speak so loud—Jane's in the garden, and I believe the back-door's open. I'm going to Oliver because my aunt has turned me out of her house. She had a perfect right to do so."

Claude stared; then he suspected the truth, and blanched. "Has—has she heard anything?"

"Yes," said Emily.

"How did she know? Who told her?"

"I did."

The suspicion had been in his heart for fully a minute, but the confirmation of it staggered him. He tried to speak, but could only lick his lips.

"Yes," she continued, "I had to tell her. I'd no right to eat her bread after I d disgraced her name. 'Oh, it was all right,' you'll say; 'nobody saw us.' I don't see that makes any difference. I've disgraced her. I couldn't bear to meet her day after day with my secret in my heart. I held my tongue for three weeks, and I felt all unclean. Then yesterday, when I was coming out of Boord's shop,

a woman looked at me and laughed, and then I heard her mention your name. You don't live in the village—you don't hear how people talk ; but I do, and I realized that I'd no right to go on living with Aunt Ethel while I was being talked about. It wasn't fair to her. So I told her everything straight out."

" But——"

" Yes, I dare say you think I'm a fool, but I don't believe in hiding things. I ought to have told her long ago. She was mad—frantic—of course, and I leave her house to-day."

" And may I ask if it's of your free will that you go back to you husband ? "

" I've nowhere else to go. Aunt Ethel wired to him last night to ask if he would have me back, and he answered that he would be glad—' glad ' is the very word he used."

" But no one can force you to return to him against your will."

" As I've told you before, I've nowhere else to go—not for the present, at any rate. I've some hopes of arranging matters with Oliver ; he can't be such a brute as to want to have me with him when he knows I hate it. He's in a fairly decent post now—secretary to a friend of Mr. Gilmour's. He may be able to allow me something till I'm able to keep myself. On the other hand, he may refuse to have anything more to do with me when he hears I've been disloyal to him. He hasn't heard that yet."

Emily laughed again, hiding her face in the dress she was folding.

" But, Em, you can't go back to him—it's preposterous, it's immoral."

" I know it is. But please don't worry me, Claude. I'm beaten. When I was younger I thought I could fight my circumstances, and I lashed out like anything ; but I was like you when you first came to the Church Cottage —don't you remember telling me ?—I'd never been shown how to clench my fists properly, I fought with my thumbs in, and now I'm beaten."

"I can't let you go back. You mustn't—and surely he won't want to have you when he knows you love another man."

"He knows that. He knew it a year ago, and was mortally jealous. Now that I've made a scandal of it, I'm sure I don't know what he'll say. Aunt seems to think he'll be magnanimous enough to forgive me if I eat humble pie."

"Has he heard?"

"Certainly not. Aunt Ethel's in such a hurry to see the last of me that we haven't had time for anything but wires. Off I go this morning, by the 11.58, and when he meets me at Victoria I can tell him what I please. It won't matter to aunt then, for once I'm out of this house I'm safe never to come back. . . . I really don't care what happens. It doesn't matter what becomes of me. I'm beaten."

She shut her box and drew the straps.

"Does Mr. Gilmour know this?"

"I don't think so. If he did, he couldn't help. Besides, he always wanted me to go back to Oliver eventually. He's supposed to be 'under probation' now. It'll only be hurrying matters a little. I wish you'd leave me, Claude. You're only making things harder, and it isn't as if there was anything else I could do."

"You can come with me."

The words rushed straight from his heart to his lips before his head could check them.

"Oh, Em, for God's sake come with me!"

She turned pale.

"No—no," she said at last, as if she were declining something to eat.

"Oh, Em. . . ." He was half-way upstairs again.

"Kindly stay at the bottom, Claude, and try to behave decently. Look at the matter from its lowest standpoint, and you'll see that you and I have gone quite far enough already. Let's thank our stars that we haven't quite reached the bottom, and make up our minds never to see each other again."

"Em, Em! You mustn't speak so damnably; surely it's better that you should go to a man you love, though he's not your husband, than that you should go to a man you don't love simply because he is."

"There's a cheap argument!" said Emily brusquely. "You don't believe it, do you?"

"Of course I do. You may scoff as much as you like, but I'm sure it would be much less immoral, whatever the world thinks, for you to come away with me than for you to go to Oliver."

"If I didn't know I was just as bad as you are, I'd want to kick you for speaking to me like this."

"But can't you see——"

"No, I can't, and please go away. I've been a fool and a scoundrel, and it's only right that I should take the consequences, even if they kill me. I'm going back to Oliver, and if I can make some arrangement with him, well and good; if not, I can always blow my brains out. It'll be no great loss—I've never made anyone particularly happy; in fact, it would have been much better for some people if I'd never been born."

Again she leaned her head on the landing-rail, but this time she wept.

"Oh, Em, for God's sake——"

"Oh, shut up with your 'for God's sakes'!" she cried savagely. "Don't you think you've tortured me enough for one morning? Can't you leave me? There; it's striking ten. Aunt Ethel said she'd be in soon after ten, and, anyhow, Jane'll be coming to help me carry down my box. . . . So please go, or there'll be a scene . . . and I hate scenes . . . we've had so many lately."

Claude turned abashed to the door, but was tempted to look back.

"Shall I see you at the station?"

"Perhaps you will. But, remember, I—I don't like long leave-takings."

"I don't suppose there'll be time for any such thing," he snapped as he went out of the door.

He dashed recklessly down Easeham Hill, narrowly escaping a waggon zigzagging up it. His recklessness was indicative of his state of mind. In the old days, when he was wont to realize his true motives in a thunderclap of self-accusing, he had always abandoned himself to a passion of remorse and shame ; but to-day, when he had realized them more or less clearly from the first, he neither groaned nor blushed. He felt absolutely brazen. The only question that once shot across his mind was whether he had gone to Emily with the deliberate purpose of asking her to come away with him. No, he thought he had not, but he was not sorry he had asked her. He still thought that the course he had proposed was less immoral and outrageous than that she had adopted. He also found himself longing for her in a dull, wretched kind of way. He dreaded lest, after all, he should not see her at the station ; but there was little fear of that, as his train started only two minutes before hers.

He reached Hastings Station soon after eleven, and schooled himself to waiting. The carrier's cart, in which Emily probably travelled, was not likely to arrive for another half-hour. After he had taken his ticket he thought of going to the Station Hotel for some sherry or some beer, but the memory of his former excess was upon him, and as he had always drunk with the hope of drowning sorrow rather than from any alcoholic craving, he found that memory deterrent enough.

A quarter to twelve struck, and the carrier's cart had not arrived. What if Emily were to catch her train only by a couple of minutes ! He could not bear the thought of not seeing her again, for their last words had been bitter, though he remembered that, strangely enough, she had not given him a single reproach for his madness at Raisins Farm ; he supposed that it was for the same reason that she did not want to kick him—" because I was just as bad as you."

Ten minutes to twelve—he grew desperate. He took her ticket for her, because he thought it would save her

trouble, and also because he did not want her to waste any of her precious moments at the booking-office. Eight minutes to twelve—there was a rumble of wheels outside the station, and the carrier's cart drove up with its two lean horses. He went out, and helped Emily to dismount. She seemed under the stress of some great and bitter emotion; her face was white, and her hands trembled. She did not speak a word till they were on the platform.

"I've got your ticket," he said.

"I—I'm going with you, Claude," said Emily.

He hardly thought to have understood her. He stared at her as she swayed in front of him, clutching her little hand-bag.

"Em . . . dear. . . ."

"Yes, I'm going with you. . . . I've been thinking over what you said. . . . I still don't think it would be less wicked for me to go with you than to go to Oliver . . . but I can't go to Oliver . . . I won't. . . . I love you, and want to be beside you in your new life. . . . Claude, I should like to sit down."

He led her to a seat. An old lady with a large quantity of hand-luggage made room for her, looking kindly at the poor young woman who seemed so ill. Claude wondered—later, not then, for then there was only one thing worth wondering at—how she would have looked if she had known what Emily had just promised.

It was all ridiculously matter-of-fact.

"I'd better see if I can't change your ticket."

He rose to go back to the booking-office, then suddenly he glanced at the two tickets in his hand, and saw that they had both been taken to Benenden.

They sat on opposite sides of the carriage, no doubt as uninteresting to the average spectator as the nursemaid and her charge at the window, or the old gentleman behind the *Daily Mail*. Neither of them spoke; there was nothing to say. Claude stared dully at the flying woods, with now

and then a glance at Emily. She sat very erect, her eyes fixed on her hands, which were folded in her lap. Once she lifted them, and they met Claude's.

At Robertsbridge they changed trains, and Claude did not afterwards fall back into his lethargy : little pricks of misery stabbed his heart, like the blood returning to a frozen limb. He felt sick at the thought of what he was doing. He realized that at last he had succumbed to that which he had been struggling both for and against for the last two years. As the little motor-train screamed through the hop-gardens, he was thrilled by occasional bursts of joy as he looked at Emily, this time beside him ; but they were as rare as the sun-rays that once or twice painted the train's shadow among the bines.

The journey to Robertsbridge had still savoured of former things : only one of them might have left the train at the junction ; but now they were both on the light railway, there could be but one destination for them both. The jolt and whirr of the machinery as usual made their song. This time it was a verse from Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol,* which he had read some six months before at Widow's Farm. The wheels hummed it as they jogged over the Rother Marshes, past the marsh farms with their black oasts, Emily's hand touching his on the seat :

> " For all men kill the thing they love,
> By all let this be heard ;
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word.
> The coward does it with a kiss,
> The brave man with a sword."

" The coward does it with a kiss.' There was his indictment, ground out on the wheels that were bearing him to his fate. He need never try to excuse himself by saying that Emily had of her free will offered to come with him. He had killed her with a kiss three weeks ago, and it was only her dead body that he took with him that day. She had come because the dead can be carried

where the living will not tread—" and all men kill the thing they love."

He glanced at her as she sat by his side. She would not be there if three weeks ago he had not taken both from himself and from her that moral chastity compared to which the chastity of the flesh is but as the garment compared to the man. She was still haggard, but she still held up her head. He admired her; he knew that she sinned more bravely than he. He had been forced to dress up some poor dummy of an excuse before he would sin—" It is less immoral for you to come with me, whom you love, than to go to your husband, whom you do not love." She wanted no excuse: " I know that it is wrong to come with you, but I am coming, because I love you."

He wished she would cry, but her eyes were bright as a sword. It was not till they had reached Little Nineveh, late in the pale and rainy afternoon, that she gave way at last. She sat by the fire, and he knelt down to take off her shoes. And then they both cried a little.

CHAPTER XXII

LITTLE NINEVEH—"TAKE FROM ME THE WAY OF LYING"—MOODS AND MUCH RAIN—AS HEMLOCK IN THE FURROWS OF THE FIELD

LITTLE NINEVEH was in most respects the opposite of Spell Land. It was an old house, and Claude had never lived in an old house. The low rafters, bulging walls, and uneven floors were fresh weights in the scale of new experience which already hung so heavy. They oppressed him, too, and the tiny leaded windows did not seem to admit enough air. There was a smell about the house of old plaster and decaying wood, and though he soon got used to this, at first it was loathsome both to him and to Emily.

The farm stood in the valley below Crit Hall; the house faced west, and at clear sunsets, when Claude returned from his oatfield or his pen, he would see the little windows shining like garnets in the black wall. He had only a few acres of arable, partly oats and partly vegetables; the rest was pasture for the cows and a paddock for the fowls, and he told Emily that their chief profits were likely to be made in the dairy and poultry-yard. There was an orchard, too, but it had been badly neglected, and would bring in little or nothing that year.

He had an assistant in the shape of a grinning, long-legged boy, whose evident wish to serve was hampered by a certain conservatism in error, which prompted him till the day he was dismissed to race the cows in for milking and hold broody hens under the pump. The first morning he and Claude spent in striving to understand each other,

while ostensibly occupied in exploring the Nineveh domains, and trying to see the bright side of the oatfield. Claude came to the conclusion that he was either a rough diamond or a thoroughgoing young scamp. He on his side seemed to look upon Shepherd as a fallen angel, tramping through wealden clay in shabby corduroys, and talking about the hay elevators, horse-rakes, patent binders, and other glories of his past.

At eleven o'clock Claude sent him to the pigs, and throwing off his coat and waistcoat, set to work to hoe cabbages. It was a relief to use his muscles, though it did not distract his thoughts as much as he could have wished; in fact, they were more active than they had ever been since his arrival at Nineveh. There was a quick, uneasy beating of his heart whenever he realized that he was soon going home to Emily. She would be waiting for him in the kitchen, her sleeves turned down, her apron off, just as Dora waited for Bert Ticehurst, Mrs. Batt of Jordan's for Mr. Batt, and Mrs. Hobbs for Mr. Hobbs of Winter Land. The servant girl, who had put in her first appearance that morning, had shown some surprise to see that he had brought his missus with him; she had not, she said, understood that he was married. He told her that Mrs. Shepherd would need a great deal of help, as she was not used to farm life. "She looks quite a lady," said the girl, as Emily passed the window.

Emily had been very quiet ever since she had come to Nineveh, and she had eaten scarcely anything; but she always smiled when she met Claude's eyes, and when he held out his hand, she fondled it.

It was years since he had worked so strenuously, for it was beneath the dignity of a yeoman farmer to hoe cabbages. At the end of an hour his muscles were aching, and the hair on his forehead was draggled with sweat; moreover, he felt ravenously hungry, and decided that it was high time for dinner. So he flung aside his hoe, and walked towards the house, his coat and waistcoat on his arm, the breeze blowing his damp shirt against his skin.

He did not find Emily as he had expected. Her sleeves were still rolled up, showing two white arms as thin as sticks, and though she did not wear an apron, that was evidently because she had not worn one all morning, judging by the state of her dress. She was crouching in front of the kitchen fire, thrusting sticks between the bars. But he was not disconcerted so much by her unpreparedness as by the smell that pervaded the room—a smell with which he was by no means familiar, but of which he realized the dread import—the smell of burnt food.

"Hullo, Em; is dinner ready?"

"No," said Emily, and broke a stick across her knee.

"It's one o'clock."

"I know that," said Emily sadly.

"What's the matter? Can't you get the fire to burn?"

"Everything's gone wrong this morning, but it's my fault. You see, I've never done any housekeeping; when I was in town we lived in rooms."

She stood up and sighed; her hair was rumpled, and half uncoiled at her nape, and there was a dark smudge across one cheek. Here was a state of affairs for which he had not been prepared—he had an idea that all women kept house by instinct.

"I've burnt the beef," said she; "at least, the outside's burnt and the inside's quite raw. I don't know how it is. And the jelly's like water, though I left it standing in the mould for ages."

"The jelly?"

"Yes. I bought a packet of Chivers' jelly, because I thought it would be easy to cook."

"Jelly!" groaned the hungry male.

"Why not?"

"Well, you can't expect me to come in after a morning's work and eat jelly. I want something solid. Can't you make a treacle pudding?"

"No."

"Well, can't the girl?"

"She's gone home, and she isn't coming back."

"The dickens why?"

"Because I'm not your wife."

He stared at Emily.

"How—how on earth does she know?" There was an uneasy suspicion in his heart.

"I told her, of course."

He turned scarlet. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she kept on calling me Mrs. Shepherd, so I told her I wasn't Mrs. Shepherd, that's all."

"And she took herself off?"

"She made some excuse about running up to her mother's, and half an hour ago a little boy brought me this note."

She dived into her pocket, and brought out a piece of crumpled paper, scrawled over in an illiterate hand:

"I rarther Annie didn't do no more work for you at Ninevy, and she will pay you her week's wages, from yours, T. Godden."

Claude looked at Emily.

"You little fool!" he cried thickly.

She started and turned pale, with a surprised look in her eyes.

"Because I tell the truth?"

"What reason had you to tell it?"

"Because you had told a lie."

"You think it was underhand of me to speak of you as Mrs. Shepherd? My dear girl——"

"Excuse me, Claude, but I undertook to do this thing only because I thought I had the courage to go through with it."

He flushed.

"And you think I haven't?"

"I see no signs of it, since you're ready to tell lies to screen your name."

"And yours."

"I want no screen, thank you. When I do anything I prefer to take the consequences."

"You've got the most uncomfortable ideas I've ever come across," he muttered. "Why should you go out of your way to bring trouble on our heads? There's no need for you to tell lies; you have only to hold your tongue."

"While you tell 'em for me. Thanks! I didn't know I had to expect this, Claude. When you asked me to come with you here, I thought you meant to take the consequences, just as I did, and not play the—coward!"

He seized her wrist, and for a moment they stared at each other, their eyes hard, their breasts heaving. For the first time in his life Claude understood why a man sometimes thrashes a woman. His hand closed tighter on her wrist; then he felt how thin it was, and dropped it.

She turned her head away, and he was seized with remorse.

"Oh, Em, I'm so sorry I've hurt you. . . . I'm a brute; I'm a wretch; I'm a——"

"Hush! I deserve to be beaten—but not by you."

"I wish I had your grit," he muttered; "but I haven't, and I don't suppose I ever shall have."

"There's precious little grit in me. If there was, I shouldn't be here—no, don't be afraid; I'm not going to waste my breath in regrets, but I—I'm going to take the consequences. Can't you understand, Claude, that it's mean to shuffle and hide? And, after all, it doesn't matter what people say. We've got each other."

He took her to his heart, and did not drop his arms till love began to touch on anguish.

It was a quiet, chastened little meal that they had together half an hour later. By the time it was nearly over Claude had to some extent recovered his spirits, and was

giving Emily a lecture on domestic economy, pointing out the ridiculousness of buying a sirloin of beef weighing eleven pounds for a household of two on one hand, and of welcoming home a hungry man from the fields with lemon jelly on the other. He helped her wash up the dinner things, and broke two plates, while she broke a tumbler.

The question that he asked himself most often during the latter half of that day was whom he should get to help Emily in the house and poultry-yard. She could not possibly manage either alone, on account both of her inexperience and her health. Living with her, he realized, as he never could have done under the old conditions, how extraordinarily frail she had become. Her spirit was so dauntless that she always walked quickly, with erect head, like one in glowing health ; but the slightest exertion made her tired, her sleep was a distressful combination of dreaming and tumbling, and a mouse would have scorned the supper she ate that night. Indeed, she would have eaten nothing if he had let her have her way, but he made her some bread and milk, and, taking her on his knee, he fed her with a spoon.

He wondered whether John Dunk, his assistant, would follow Annie Godden's example when the truth reached him, as it was bound soon to do, through the conduit of gossip. To Claude's relief, he took it phlegmatically, and not only showed no signs of going himself, but actually found a woman to help Emily. She lived alone " up at the road," as they of Nineveh called the realms of civilization and strong winds above them. In course of time it appeared that her own past had not been entirely creditable, and that she served her mistress for the same reason that a man who has had the plague can nurse another sick of it without fear of infection.

Thus Emily and Claude became social outcasts. He had not thought of this in the first heats of adventure, and if he had thought of it, he would have refused to believe it could cause him the misery that weighed upon him in those days.

Sometimes he felt indignant with Emily for having brought their fate upon them, and he would consider the deception he had meant to practise entirely righteous under the circumstances; but he was more often smitten with admiration for her courage—after all, why should they live a lie as well as a revolution? As they had sinned, let them have the courage of their misdeeds. That was Emily's gospel, and even when smarting under his obloquy, he realized that it was better than his own.

Their ill-fame doubtless militated against the success of the farm. Dwellers in country districts have, under a misleading exterior coarseness, far stronger and stiffer prejudices than their brethren in towns. Claude's sale of milk, eggs, vegetables, and fruit was likely to be entirely local, and locally he was banned. Folk would not buy of him as long as there were honest men to touch their money, public opinion being strengthened by the rumour that commercial as well as moral reasons advised a boycott. Children were sent from "the road" with milk-cans to Pricklegate, Swattenden, and Beretilt instead of to Nineveh; the sale of damsons was doubled at Ingram's, because none were bought at Shepherd's. He had a small custom for his vegetables at Tenterden and Hawkhurst, but the cost of conveyance sorely damaged his profits.

Even worse than this commercial ostracism, dangerous as it proved, was the alienation of those who might have been his friends. Claude did not miss them at his fireside, for there he had one worth them all; but their greetings, their inquiries, their gossip, all that had surrounded, half unnoticed, his life at Spell Land, he found hard to do without. He often exchanged a word or two with the farmers he met at markets, where he went more from custom than anything else, but no one ever spoke to Emily. There was the chief bitterness. She, with half his guilt and twice his spirit, had to bear thrice his shame. Society, in the lanes as in the streets, looks most darkly on the woman on such occasions. After all, he could not blame

it; had not he himself always shrunk from and despised those sinners against self he had met in his small experience? And had he not always condemned the woman most?

The only being who never failed in his respect to Emily and his service to Claude was John Dunk. Day after day he shouted his "Good-mornun, missus," to Emily through the kitchen window; and if Mrs. Hodder were late or lazy, he was always ready to help in the poultry-yard, or even the dairy. He turned out to be some years older than Claude had imagined; he had always thought him eighteen or nineteen, but one day the lad told him that he was twenty-six. "And I know how middlin' hard life sometimes is fur them wot are young, Mus' Shepherd."

Claude often asked himself what those at Easeham thought of him and Emily. Miss Kingsley would have heard that Oliver Mills had not yet welcomed his prodigal wife, and it was likely that she had made conjectures. To confirm her in these, he had, by Emily's wish, told the truth to James in a letter he wrote him soon after his arrival at Nineveh. That letter was never answered, and his brother's silence was symbolical. The old life seemed to have been torn off him and his companion, like a garment too good for beggars. Only once a hand was reached out to them from the past, and that in his foolish misery he thrust aside. One day, tramping to Wittersham Market, he met at a turning a tall man in black. He turned red and sick with shame as he faced David Gilmour.

He realized that the minister must be on his way from the station to Little Nineveh, and there was no man he felt less inclined or less able to meet. When he told Emily of the incident on his return, he could not remember what he had said or what he had done; all he remembered was that the outstretched hand had dropped, that the voice in which friendship overthrew reproach had ceased, and the comforter had turned away.

"I'm glad you didn't let him come here," said Emily.

Claude sometimes wondered whether Mills would take any steps to win back his wife, but the young man either saw the uselessness of interference, or else was not inclined to interfere. One day only they were reminded of him. A letter came for Emily, from an old school friend, for whom her history had stopped on her marriage day. It had been addressed to the house where she and Oliver had lodged in Chelsea, and was forwarded to " Mrs. Mills, c/o Mr. Claude Shepherd, Little Nineveh, Near Benenden, Kent." The sour irony of the direction made both their faces hot, and the realization that Mills knew of their whereabouts, both their hearts sick. They spoke hardly a word to each other during the rest of that breakfast ; they were like a couple of children whipped together and each shy of the other's witness of his shame.

There was a succession of heavy rains that autumn. Day after day one woke to weeping skies, or thick blankets of mist lingering in the valley long after the higher ground was clear. Work was almost at a standstill, except among the stock. Shepherd lost the last of his scanty damson crop, and the turnips and cabbages Dunk and he had manured with such care were washed out of the ground. Some of the stored potatoes rotted, too, and then, to his dismay, the best of his two cows developed garget, which meant not only that he lost her milk, but that he had the vet.'s bill to pay.

Whenever, in after years, he heard the drip of rain on thatch or trees, his thoughts went back to Little Nineveh, down in the wet valley below Crit Hall, and he saw their kitchen, lit by the embers, and perhaps by the rays of sunset, streaming like red wrath through the rain. He sat idle on those evenings. Work was over, and he did not care to read. Emily would be in the next room at the piano, of which the lowest octave was out of tune, and he would lean back in his chair and listen to her playing. Sometimes she sang her Irish songs, but she had quite lost her accent, and her voice had no music in it. When it was too dark for her

to see the notes, she would steal into the kitchen, and he would take her on his knee, and play with her hair, pulling out the pins, so that it fell about her neck, and he could hide his face in it. Oh, that ceaseless drip of rain!

His relations with Emily could not always have been typified by these moments. They found their symbols rather in the restless walks he and she took together when the rain had cleared of an evening, and the sunset burned on the wet roads. She was all unrest and nervousness, and so was he. When the lamps were lit in the cottages of Iden Green, a man and a woman walked side by side in silence, in the outer darkness.

Emily lost her looks terribly that autumn. She had never been beautiful, but she had once been very near it—in the days of Oliver Mills's courtship. He remembered the dainty flush on her cheeks, her hair puffed out with side-combs, her demure smile, her pretty hat. She was so different now.

"Em," he said to her once, "I wish you could do your hair better; you look quite old when you do it like that."

"I can't do it any other way."

"Can't you make it stick out at the sides, with combs or something?"

"Perhaps I could."

"And it looks so dull—can't you make it shine?"

"There's no one to see it."

"There's me. Don't I count? And don't you think I like to see you decent?"

She looked at him in some surprise. She remembered something, and so did he.

Their differences did not always end as quietly as this, neither was she always so meek. Both their tempers were a little frayed. He disliked her unhousewifely ways, and she was disappointed to find that his heart did not make him forget his stomach. Besides, when two people live together, they find a multitude of jagged ends in the lives

that seemed to fit into each other so easily when meetings were days apart and of an hour's lasting. It was not till he came actually to share her daily life that Claude realized the multitude of little differences and disparities between him and Emily. After all, she had been bred at the Rectory and he at the farm, and many times a day she must have been repulsed by a certain coarseness which she had either not seen or not realized in the weeks of occasional meeting, by a dozen little incidents difficult to describe, but typified by the fact that he generally said "ain't" instead of "isn't."

The rain still fell. There had never been such rain. Financial cares made Shepherd irritable. He frowned over Emily's housekeeping books, and grumbled when she asked him for money. How he longed for James's cool head and common sense! But even James could have done nothing in such rain.

After all, anxieties of credit and debit accompany most inexperienced endeavour, and rough or rubbing edges most double yokes. Claude sometimes felt that he could easily have borne both burdens had he not already carried a load of remorse which broke both his will-power and his patience. As he worked in the wet and mist of that December, a strange fear, long dead, began to quicken in his heart. He began to take great walks alone in the surrounding country; he would come home drenched and tired, long after the supper was cold, and find Emily pinched with anxiety. He would kiss her and abuse himself, but the next evening he was off again. The fear was always with him on those walks, but it was far worse when he worked with his mattock or his hoe. Once, when he was toiling among his vegetables, such as the rain had left in the ground, he flung down the hoe, and covered his face with his hands, for the fear was upon him as never before, even at night—it was the fear of James's God.

"You're a Jonah—that's what you are." He had not forgotten his brother's words, and God's storms followed him even as they had followed Jonah. The philosopher, the

freethinker, the admirer of half-understood Nietzsche, groaned and grovelled to think that the Lord was visiting his wrongdoing upon him, and incidentally upon the whole of Kent and Sussex, in relentless rain. Why did the skies never clear and the drip never cease? Because there was a guilty wretch at Nineveh, who had walked into the snare his God had spread.

As the days went by, the terror grew, and though he occasionally had moments of defiance and a high stomach, they were as brief as the glimpses of clear shining after rain. Sometimes he would tell himself that no man could hold him guilty, that he was a victim of Fate, of the inevitableness of life. How well he might have played his part if that low comedian Circumstance had not blundered in and spoiled his most effective scenes! Emily and he had not come to Little Nineveh of their free will; they had been marooned there by Circumstance. Then suddenly down would topple his house of defence, built in the sand of a false hypothesis, and back again would come that awful sense of uncleanness, of remorse, and horror, and he was once more face to face with an outraged neighbour, an angry God, and judgment springing up as hemlock in the furrows of the field.

He said nothing of his terrors to Emily, and if she had any on her part, she said nothing of them to him. Those were very silent days. He afterwards found it strange to think that in all his life he had never talked with Emily on any really intimate subject; that till her last hour her soul, her aspirations, her religion, if she had any, were a sealed book. In the old days they used to talk of books, but now that they no longer cared to read, they no longer cared to talk of them. They exchanged words only on the most banal matters of the house and farm; they reckoned up accounts, they discussed chicken-foods. Sometimes their whole attitude would partake of this reserve, and for days they would shrink from each other as far as their bonds would allow; at other times indifference was only for speech, and they would cling together childishly his hand

seldom out of hers. Only once did Emily break silence, and sum up the last six months. It was after supper, and they were both sitting, as usual, before the fire, when she said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice :

" We've made rather a mess of it, haven't we, Claude ? "

And he answered : " Yes, Emily, a damnable mess."

CHAPTER XXIII

MIST—A FOOTSTEP IN THE DARK—THE POT AND THE KETTLE—THE POWER OF THE FLOCK—SPRING DAWN

THE New Year came—as unlike the New Year as Christmas had been unlike Christmas—and then spring came, even to Nineveh. Flowers began to bud and smell, brutes to love and play, the leaf and the thrush were together on the apple-tree. The rain ceased, but there was a thick white mist at nights, and mists were late risers at Nineveh. Often when Claude and Emily were at their breakfast their outlook was nothing but drifting white, through which, occasionally, they saw as shadows the realities of their outer world, as a man in love sees through his love all that is not love.

There was a mist that evening of the third of April. Claude had to get up and shut the window, and even after he had done so, he still saw the fog hanging in drifty cobwebs among the rafters. It was past eleven o'clock, and Emily had gone to bed an hour ago. He sprawled on the settle, smoking a clay pipe, and drowsily fuming over the events of the day.

He had dismissed Dunk—he was not worth his wages—and Claude had decided to give up the oatfield and most of the cabbage ground. Dairy and poultry work was the best for an idiot like him, and he had wanted Dunk only because of the oatfield and the cabbage ground, which were both to be sown for permanent pasture next week. Perhaps when the seeds were up he could earn a few pounds by " keeping " stock ; but at present he schemed only vaguely ; he was chiefly occupied in regretting Dunk. When he had told him

of his reason for dismissing him, he had half expected him to offer his services for nothing, after the manner of the servants he had met in occasional melodramas on the Hastings Pier. But the lad had taken his week's notice without a word, except to express a hope that his master would give him a good character.

Claude was too tired and sleepy for persistent moodiness. Every now and then he fell into a doze, waking the next moment with a start, as his relaxed muscles allowed his body to slide. "A-a-ah! I'll go to bed," he yawned at each waking, but he was too lazy to drag himself upstairs.

He began to dream of all kinds of things—the cows, the poultry, Dunk, the woman at the post-office, his brothers, Miss Kingsley, David Gilmour, the wood over at Four Wents. All the time he knew that he was dreaming, and thanked Heaven that he did not dream of Emily. But soon he slept more soundly, and then he dreamed, without knowing he dreamed, that he saw Emily coming out of a theatre on Oliver Mills's arm. She wore a beautiful dress, and silver tassels in her hair, and she was smiling and talking. He cried to her, to ask her why she had gone back to Mills, and she said: "Because you treated me so horribly. I'd rather be with my husband, though he has Mrs. Franklin on his other arm." Then he looked, and, indeed, there was another woman beside Oliver, but she was not Mrs. Franklin—just innocent Nellie Bennett from Mrs. White's school, wearing her school hatband, with her long hair loose on her back. He was going to speak to her, but she pointed to Emily, and he saw, to his horror, what he had not noticed before—that Emily's shoulders were covered with bruises right up to her neck. "Oh, Em!" he cried, "did that brute give you those?" "No," said Emily; "you did." "Oh no!" he cried. "No, no, no!" "Yes, you did. You beat me in the dairy, three years after I came to live with you." Then he seemed to see himself beating Emily in the dairy, holding her head down on the table and flogging her with a strap. He cried out, and woke.

He sat up, and stared wildly and foolishly round him. He was still horror-stricken, and only half awake. He could not remember whether he had beaten Emily or not. No, he had not ; he knew it at last. *But perhaps he should, when they had been together three years.* Only to-day he had spoken to her roughly. He often spoke roughly to her now ; as the weeks wore on, his temper was growing more and more uncertain. He would very likely soon take to drink again ; then would come the uplifted hand, and at last the uplifted strap. After all, he was but a lad of the people, descended from a long line of wife-beaters. Their blood was in his veins, and only a thin varnish of education covered the inherited Orientalism which regards woman as man's property, to minister to his wants, provide his pleasure, bear his children, and endure his blows. He was living the very life most calculated to make this wrappered animalism stark. He shuddered, covering his face. A-a-ah ! He would go to bed.

He rose, still shuddering and yawning, and stumbled in the fire-dusk, looking for a candle. Then suddenly he started. A footstep sounded outside in the dark. He paused and listened ; again it sounded on the flags. Then came a knock at the door. He struck a light.

It was the first time that knocker had been lifted since he came to Nineveh. Whose hand was on it ? Doubtless that of some outcast like him and Emily, perhaps, in spite of their brotherhood, not inclined to treat them brotherly. He must act with care. He took the candle, and going into the passage, he drew back the bolts, but did not loose the chain.

" Who's there ? "

" Is that you—Shepherd ? "

At the sound of that voice some chord in memory twanged harshly. Claude started, his hand shook, the candle-flame flickered, and flew through the opening of the door, lighting up the face of the man who stood outside.

" Let me in," said Oliver Mills.

Shepherd did not move.

"Let me in," repeated Mills, and pushed at the door.

Claude loosed the chain, and he brushed past him into the passage.

"Where is she?" he asked in a low voice.

Claude suddenly became extremely calm and collected. For the last few minutes he had been as a dreaming man, but now he was broad awake, and more mentally alert, even, than was usual in waking hours.

"Will you come into this room?" he said.

"Where is she?" asked Oliver. He seemed in the mood for repeating himself that night.

Claude made no answer, but went into the kitchen, Mills following him. He set the candle on the table and looked at his rival. He was wrapped in a large coat, the collar nearly meeting the brim of his hat; the light, moreover, was tricky, but it struck Claude that his eyes seemed more deep-set than of old. He felt an indefinable embarrassment in his presence, in spite of his calm. For months he had been calling him scoundrel, coward, and brute, but to-night he found no abuse for him even in his heart; instead, he experienced a certain kind of deference, difficult to explain —indeed, deference is not the right word—the vague uneasiness of a man who is in the presence of one he has outraged, but of whom he is neither pitiful nor afraid.

It was evident that neither of them knew exactly what to say. Each felt that something impressive was demanded of him, in the way both of self-defence and righteous indignation. But many things shut their mouths—embarrassment, surprise, emotion, the memory of a dead friendship, and perhaps the haunting of the proverb that treats of glass-houses and stones.

"Well," said Oliver jerkily at last, "I came here to see her, not you."

"She's in bed."

"I'm going to her."

"Not you!"

Claude stood between him and the door.

" What right have you to interfere ? I'm her husband."

" And I'm the man who's protecting her from her husband."

They stared at each other in silence.

" Cur ! " came at last from between Mills's teeth.

Shepherd found his calmness oozing away. He fought for it, and as soon as he had it again he spoke.

" Look here, Mills, whatever you and I call each other, it'll be merely a case of the pot calling the kettle black, so let's save our breath for more important matters. I can't prevent your going to her, but I hope you won't till you've talked over certain things with me. Anyhow, I beg you not to go to her suddenly ; she's been poorly for months, and a scene with you'ud be enough to kill her."

" I don't wonder she's ill," sneered Oliver. " I expect she's been having a hell of a time with you here. This is a pretty place to bring a lady to."

There was an emphasis, implying contrast, on the word " lady " that sent the blood into Claude's face.

" You'd better not take that tone with me, or somebody 'ull get licked."

" Very likely. Cads that go off with other men's wives generally end in getting licked."

" Then Mr. Franklin ought to be here," sneered Claude.

Oliver coloured, and mumbled something the other could not hear.

" You see," continued Shepherd, " the sense of what I said about the pot and the kettle. You and I are tarred with the same brush. It's time we had this out, and we'll never have it out unless we keep cool. Take a chair."

He pulled a chair towards the fire. At first Oliver would not sit, but when Claude sat down, his dignity compelled him.

" Perhaps," said Claude, " you'll be so good as to tell me what made you come here."

Mills laughed.

" That's a pretty question ! "

" It's very natural. Why should you let her alone for nine months, and then suddenly turn up in the middle of the night, and claim her ? "

" Because at first I swore I'd let her go to the dogs if she chose."

" Now you feel you'd rather she came back to you ? "

" I'm here to fetch her."

" But the question is—does she want to go ? "

" She alone can tell me that."

" I doubt very much if she'll go with you of her free will, and if you use force . . ."

" You'll kill me."

" I expect so."

" Or I'll kill you."

" Possibly."

There was a brief explosive silence, and before either could speak again, a footstep sounded outside in the passage, making them both start.

" There she is," said Oliver.

Claude did not move or speak.

The door opened, and then he suddenly sprang up, so that he might stand between Mills and the woman who came in.

Emily was on the threshold. She carried no light, just stood there in the darkness with her clenched hands. Her hair was unpicturesquely plaited for bed, and over her nightgown she wore a great-coat of Shepherd's, reeking of the cow-yard.

" Claude," she said, " I heard Oliver's voice."

He could hide Mills from her no longer. She saw him, and the next moment outraged the sense of fitness of both with a loud laugh.

" There's nothing to laugh at," said Claude, while Mills unconsciously stiffened. Neither knew that when a woman is in her last strait she generally laughs.

Emily accepted the rebuke meekly. " I heard voices,"

she said, 'and I wondered who it was, so I came down. I'm glad I came."

"Em!" Once more Claude's sense of propriety was outraged.

"I've always wanted to have things out with Oliver."

This time it was Mills who was taken aback.

"I've come to fetch you home with me," he stammered. "I should think you were sick of this."

"I'm sick of everything," said Emily.

Claude seized her arm.

"Em—my little dear—you won't forsake me? It 'ud kill me now."

"Can't you trust me?"

"You'd best let her alone!" exclaimed Mills, who was beginning to recover his bluff.

"Well, take care what you say to her, that's all. It's enough to make her ill, treating her to a scene at this time of night."

"As for the time of night, that's because I've been tramping round half the country looking for this damned hole. I'm fair beat, Em—and it shan't be for nothing, either. I'm going to have a plain talk with you—and no scoundrels listening."

"I shan't leave this room, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, clear out!" cried Emily. "I can't say what I want to Oliver if you stay."

"Surely you don't mean——"

"You needn't have the slightest fear of my going back to him," she said, a little contemptuously; "but I want to fight it out with him. I left him in a frenzy, but now I'm cool, and I'm going to pay him what I owe—a decent explanation. But I'd rather you didn't listen. Go into the sitting-room till we've finished."

"She's quite right," said Mills; "there's a battle owing between her and me, and we don't want any lookers-on. Damn it all! I'm her husband, and I shan't leave her without having done my best to take her away. If she won't come, I can't help it. In that case she can stay—

till she gets sick of you and leaves you . . . or you strangle her. . . ."

Shepherd's head was bent. For the first time he saw the reasonableness of Mills's demand In all decency he could not leave the house without a last appeal to Emily. Would she yield to him? He knew that she would not; still, society, decency, morality, demanded that the appeal should be made. He thought over these matters quite impersonally. Despair sometimes reduces nature to its lowest terms of common sense.

" Very well," he said slowly, " I'll leave you."

Emily saw that the ignominy of his position was being beaten into him, and for the first time her eyes filled with tears.

He was glad to see her, as he thought, at last show an emotion fitting to the case.

" I'll wait in the sitting-room," he muttered, turning to the door.

" You understand—don't you, Claude? "

He understood, but his heart was cold and sick as he left the room. He had no right to stay near them, he realized bitterly. He went through the outer kitchen to the little sitting-room at the back of the house. It was deadly cold, damp, and stuffy; a patch of moonlight lay on the fireless hearth. He flung himself into a chair, and thought of the two in the warmth.

He wondered what he was saying, what she was answering. He had lost all fear of her going with him. Oliver's visit, late at night and late in his wife's desertion, must appear to Emily as it appeared to Claude, the result of his familiar motive, caprice. Caprice was stamped on it, deadening its appeal. But a worse fear haunted Shepherd, the fear that, though Emily would not go away with her husband, she could not stay with her lover. He realized that night that he had no power to stand alone against the flock. It was all very well to sneer at the herd-instinct of the individual, but in point of fact nothing is more powerful or more appalling than the herd. In the

kitchen was Oliver Mills, a man he still thought more guilty than he, responsible for the beginnings of sorrow, the first cause of Emily's martyrdom, but because the herd supported him, because he held in relation to Emily a position which the herd had sanctioned, he was entitled to privileges which Shepherd, with only love and necessity at his back, was bound to concede to him. He entirely realized the rightfulness of Mills's position, and if he had deserved that to which he had right, he would have been overwhelmed by it. Even as matters stood, the sight of him—weak, guilty, wavering, undignified, a wind-bag of caprice and bravado—had thrust home to him in all its bitterness the reproach of those who stand without the camp.

If Oliver left Nineveh alone, he asked himself—sitting in the darkness, biting his nails—could he ever take up his old relations with Emily? He had never faced them courageously, and courage was absolutely indispensable to such relations. George Eliot and George Lewes had had it, Emily had it, Claude had it not. He remembered the dream of three hours back; it seemed to forecast the future of a man who has the courage neither to sin nor to leave off sinning.

Such thoughts were unbearable to him as he sat with cold limbs before the black hearth, brought suddenly face to face with the beginning and the end. He rose, and went to the bookshelf. Who would stand his friend? Sterne, Fielding, Mackenzie, Lytton? They all spoke of love. Love was everywhere, behind all those covers. There was Nietzsche, curse him! "Morality is the herd-instinct of the individual," "Morality is a white lie," "Conscience is not the voice of God, but of other men in the heart of man." "Sin is a Jewish invention." Thus spake Zarathustra, who lived according to the herd-instinct and told the white lie. If he had departed from the herd he would not have jeered at it; he would have seen that it is no herd of foolish sheep, but a herd of buffaloes, trampling down the outcast. He would not have called sin a Jewish

invention if he had sinned as Claude had sinned, and seen the sin eating into him like a cancer, and defiling and disfiguring him like a leprosy. Unclean ! Unclean !

He turned away from the bookcase to a shelf where stood one or two volumes of Swedenborg, which Gilmour had given him from time to time. Somehow he found a certain restfulness in that solemn calf-binding ; to handle it was to experience vicarious righteousness. He took out *Heaven and Hell*, and sat with it on his knee. " When in the presence of His disciples the Lord spake concerning the consummation of the age . . ." The calf-bound pomposity slid to the floor, and Claude burst out laughing. He rolled in his chair, and laughed hysterically, like a girl. In the kitchen the outraged husband is speaking to his outraged wife, and the outrageous betrayer of their honour sits reading Swedenborg—in a calf-bound edition, too. His sides fairly ached ; it was long since he had had anything half so good to laugh at.

After that he sat still, a hand on each knee. He must have been utterly exhausted, for he fell asleep. His brain was a whirlpool, his conscience a battlefield, his heart Sodom and Gomorrah, and yet he slept. At least, he suddenly found himself lying in a strange, twisted position, his head on the arm of his chair, and there was a pink square on the floor where the white one had been. He had either fainted or slept, and as he had never fainted in his life, he was inclined to believe the latter. He sat up stiffly, his limbs aching. Then he rose and went over to the window. The mists lay like a wall beyond the garden, the sunrise daubed them and the sky above them.

He looked at his watch ; it was nearly five. What a time he had slept ! Oliver must have gone—had Emily gone too ? The possibility of what four hours ago had been the grossly impossible now suddenly overwhelmed him. Mills might have persuaded her. After all, she had had three months' happiness with him, and never a day with her lover. How much might not have happened while he

lay in that monstrous unnatural sleep! He ran out of the sitting-room, and hurried to the kitchen. It was empty.

He looked anxiously round the room, and noticed a paper pinned to the mantelpiece. It was folded and addressed to him.

They had gone, then. He was alone. But his imagination became greedy, and demanded even greater horrors. Perhaps he had killed her—the newspapers were full of such things. He might have come on purpose to do it. Claude had not heard a sound, but he had been asleep, the kitchen was far off, and these old walls were thicker than at Spell Land. Besides, he might have killed her noiselessly, strangled her as he had said Claude would do some day.

All these conjectures did not take longer to pass through his mind than it took his hand to snatch the paper from the wall and unfold it. He read a different story. As he read he felt a strange shuddering of his skin, showing him that the horror and the danger were far enough off for him to dare to contemplate them in all their intensity. The letter ran:

"4.45 a.m. She's gone upstairs. I've done my best, but she won't come. All the same, I know she's wretched here. You and she weren't cut out for notorious evil-livers, so I'll give you the chance of being moderately respectable. There's only one thing to be done, and I've made up my mind to do it. You haven't the spirit to get her out of this mess, so I must. After all, I've had a big share in getting her into it. There's no good thinking of a divorce—I earn three pound a week, and a man shouldn't expect luxuries on that. Besides, there would be a 'discretionary bar' in this case. It would mean more mud for her, too, and she's had enough. My life's been a fiasco—everything's gone against me. The only thing I care about doing now is to help Emily, though I know you don't believe I love her. She's had two brutes to spoil her life, and when I'm

gone there'll only be one, so she'll run a better chance of happiness. That's your look-out. When you want your gun, it's in the orchard.

"O. M."

Claude stared at the letter, then he put up his hand to his head, which swam a little. Then he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Thank God!

That hell of sin, self-loathing, and self-betrayal was over. He could wash his hands, he could marry Emily. He need no longer each morning look across the table at the woman he had ruined. An honest, happy, self-respecting woman, his wife, should sit opposite him, an honest, happy, self-respecting man. The past should bury its dead, the future should go with a godspeed.

Thus his mind galloped, like a horse set free from an insupportable load. But his sense of decency, which had been kicked over in the first plunge, now suddenly sprang up and seized the bridle. It was hideous to exult in a man's self-inflicted death. Oliver's letter discovered many signs of a generous spirit; he had never been altogether bad, and he had once been Claude's friend. As he stood there in the growing light, the dead man's character was for the first time aureoled in charity. His fickleness and pliability appeared as no more than the manifestations of an artistic temperament; his lack of dignity was nothing worse than the evergreen boyishness of a heart which even in the midst of evil and dishonour had kept young. As for his caprice, to which he and those who knew him owed most of their sorrows, Claude saw it now as an amiable, impetuous weakness, adding romance to his life and tragedy to his death. Probably he had blown his brains out in the stress of that same caprice—a sudden contrariness, a sudden and transient distaste for life—just as he had come to claim Emily in the whirlwind of a sudden tenderness. And as, if Emily had yielded and gone with him, he would probably have regretted it when the caprice

had passed, and wished her away, so perhaps after this sick desire for death would come a sick lust for life; perhaps when he lay among the long spring grasses of the orchard, he would pray that the blood and the life might not flow too fast for him to see once more the sunrise on the cherry-flowers. Claude's heart was heavy and ashamed within him; this, indirectly, was his doing; it was to him Oliver had owed that momentary abhorrence of life, long enough for him to seek death, and yet too short for men to say that in death he had found the only possible cure for his pain. There was a rush of tears to Shepherd's eyes—but in a fury he dashed them away.

After all, now that at last the sky was clear, why should he be afraid of his thankfulness? Oliver's death was not his fault, merely a case of circumstance befriending him for a change and a wonder; his rival's blood was not on his head. If he had known of his intention, he would certainly have thwarted it. But it was too late now. Poor fellow! His letter was marked 4.45, and the hands of Claude's watch now pointed to 5.0. He must have been sleeping when the shot was fired, for, if not, he would certainly have heard it. Indeed, it was a marvel it had not awakened him, for one of the sitting-room windows looked out on the orchard. But, now he remembered, it was just at 4.55 that he had wakened; perhaps, then, after all, he had been roused by Oliver's death-knell. He probably shot himself between ten and five minutes to five.

He shuddered, then turned again to the letter. To his surprise, he saw that there was ink on his fingers. For a moment he hardly realized what this involved; then he saw that his name, scrawled on the other side of the folded sheet, was smudged. It must have been wet when he took it from the wall.

Again he hardly realized the full significance of a startlingly significant fact. Then suddenly the light broke, and memory revived. He snatched out his watch, and looked at the grandfather's clock behind the settle, by

which Oliver had probably reckoned his time. He compared the hands of both. His watch was ten minutes fast, and he remembered that, the afternoon before, he had noticed this, but had for some reason omitted to set it right.

He stood motionless, the watch in his hand. So, after all, it was only ten minutes to five. Oliver must have left the kitchen but a few seconds before Claude entered it—hence the undried ink of his letter. In that case he was possibly still alive. He had had only five minutes in which to take himself from the house to the orchard and blow out his brains. Claude had stood only five minutes thumbing that paper, though it had seemed an hour.

He was possibly alive. As apprehension sharpened Claude's wits, he realized that " possibly " was not the right word. He was certainly alive. When Shepherd had wakened, Mills had not even left the house ; and if he had shot himself in the orchard, anyone awake in either the sitting-room or the kitchen was bound to have heard it. The fact that he had not heard it showed plainly that it had not been fired. There was still time.

But he did not move ; he would not, could not, move a finger. Emily's only chance of happiness lay in this man's death. If he died, her lover could make her an honest woman—that was how one spoke at Spell Land. His death was a necessity. He must die. Shepherd had no right to prevent him. Emily's happiness was more precious than that scoundrel's life. Claude's own . . .

He had gone into the passage and laid his hand on the latch of the door, but he did not lift it. He wished that Mills would make haste, so that he could truthfully say he had not had time to stop him. Perhaps he would not kill himself, after all ; perhaps the impulse had already passed. Then all these scruples were vain. . . . But he ought to make sure ; he had no business to stand there wrangling with himself while a fellow-man and a one-time friend was contemplating self-slaughter. At last the door was open. The dawn wind fluttered in, and Claude looked

out. The mist had cleared from the garden, and hid only the farther end of the cabbage-ground. The orchard was clear. Claude could see the wet grass shining in the sunrise, and a man standing amidst it with a gun. His purpose was still sure, then, though rather slow. He was half hidden by the trees, but Shepherd could see the sunlight gleaming on the barrel of the gun as he moved it. He was slow ; he was shy.

Claude took a step forward. He tried to shout, but his throat was dry. Mills was damnably slow. If only he knew it, he would find it easier if he did it quicker. He was doing it from bravado ; as a boy at school, he had smoked from bravado ; as a young man in business, he had got drunk from bravado ; as a young idiot in love, he had gone to the dogs from bravado ; and now he was killing himself from bravado. He would not do it ; his blood was cooling ; he was losing his bluff. . . . Another step along the path, another attempt to shout.

He had taken off his coat. He had lain down. That's the best way to do this sort of thing with a gun. A gun's a clumsy weapon for suicide. Still, when one's only killing oneself from bravado . . .

" Claude, what was that ? "

He had run half-way to the orchard, and then had stood still, his back bent, his hands twitching. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Emily in the doorway.

" What was that ? "

" What are you doing here ? "

" I heard a gun go off, and somebody shouted."

She was in her under-bodice and print petticoat, her arms folded across her breast to keep off the wind, and when she ran to him he saw that her feet were bare.

" Emily, go back to bed at once. You'll catch your death of cold. What's there odd in a gun being fired ? You've heard plenty since you came here. I expect it was somebody scaring sparrows."

" But it was quite close to the house—and it's so

early. . . I was frightened. . . . Oh, Claude, I thought perhaps Oliver had killed you."

She was crying, and his heart warmed towards her. He took her in his arms and kissed her. She would be glad.

" Em, it's himself he has killed."

" Oh ! "

A bitter scream burst from her, and if he had not held her she would have broken away.

" Oh no, Claude—no ! "

" It's true, dearest—and don't be so frantic ; I thought perhaps you—this has saved us——"

" How ? "

She was straining away from him, her head flung back, and her tumbled hair sweeping the daffodils behind her.

" How has it saved us ? " she repeated, and managed to thrust her hands between her breast and his.

" Why, Emily, surely you know—we can marry——"

" And will that save us ? "

She laughed. Then she suddenly became stiff like a terrified cat. He could hardly hold her.

" Let me go to him—perhaps he isn't dead ; you think it will save us if his blood is on my head—on your head—on both our heads ? Let me go ! "

She wriggled violently, but he gripped her elbows.

" You shan't go. You shall go back to your bed ; that's where you shall go ! This is a man's work."

She bent her head swiftly ; the next moment she was free, scudding like a wild thing over the grass, and he was staring at the hand she had bitten like a wild thing.

" Great God ! "

The blood rushed to his head—the blood of his fathers. He dashed after her, but she was over the orchard palings, floundering through the grass, her petticoat drenched and stained. He reached her just as she reached Oliver, and flung himself down beside her and him. The next moment he was holding her head down on his knee, his left arm across her shoulders.

" You brought it on yourself," he said when he released her.

" I suppose I deserve it for having bitten you." She spoke very meekly, and he remembered something that Blackman had said about a woman being like a dog, and never really respecting you till you had licked her. The reflection checked the tide of shame that was beginning to rush over him.

" If you behave like a naughty child, you must be punished like one," he said. Then he noticed that she had a great hot colour in her cheeks, and that her eyes were burning. He did not feel quite so confident.

" He's dead," she said slowly.

" Now you're satisfied on that point, you had better come home. I can't see why you cry. It's the best thing he could have done for himself . . . and he only did it from bravado. Come, Em, don't cry, dear. I'm sorry I hurt you, but you made me mad. Look at my finger ; it's still bleeding."

" So is Oliver," said Emily.

He turned from her, trying to hide his sick shame in impatience. He stooped over Mills, and shuddered. There could be no doubt that the poor devil was dead ; half his head had been blown away.

" This is no place for you," he said to Emily.

She sat in the wet grass, rocking herself and crying. He patted her arm, and she moaned.

" Come home, my poor little dear. I'm so sorry. Don't cry."

" I'm not coming home. I can't. He's dead, and we ve as good as killed him. You don't understand. You're so thick-headed and hard-hearted. You think only that we can marry ; you're glad he's dead, because we can be respectable. . . . I give myself to you, and you—you're afraid."

" Oh, Em ! " he cried, kneeling in the grass beside her.

" I gave up so much for you, and all you give me is a thrashing."

He was half crying himself. He thought she was delirious.

"You poor darling! come home. I'll carry you."

"No—no!" She edged away from him, but when he laid hold of her she suddenly became still, with a terrified, imploring meekness that thrust its reproach like a sword into his heart. He picked her up unresisting, and carried her home like a child over his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXIV

" AND THY GOD MY GOD "—CAT AND CUR—MENE TEKEL, PERES

IT was a grey evening, the clouds sagged over huddling, windswept woods, and the last light had faded from the room where Claude Shepherd knelt praying to James's God: " O God! O God! I have sinned—but surely I have suffered enough—I cannot bear any more. I repent—I will atone—do not let her die—there was so much against me—do not let her die."

James's God had triumphed at last. There was no use denying Him now. No more would Claude smile when men said, " It is the Lord's doing," for now he knew what the Lord could do in the day of His fierce anger.

O Lord, Thy judgments make a man marvel. Thou followest him so swiftly and so silently; Thou fallest upon him so fiercely and so stealthily. He runs like a lame sheep; he can neither go in nor come out without Thee. He runs through the wilderness, and both the Shepherd and the flock pursue him; and when they find him, the Shepherd shall break his legs, and the flock shall trample that which the Shepherd hath broken. . . .

" Behold, He shall take from thee the desire of thine heart and the light of thine eyes." . . . Emily was dying; the man who loved her had killed her—" For all men kill the thing they love." He had loved her purity and her innocence, and he had killed them both; he had loved her good name—he had killed that; he had loved her body, and that was dying; he had loved her love, and that . . . O James's God, Thy wisdom is infinite. Thy knife never blunders, none of Thy shafts fall wide!

. . . But it was not only the thing he loved that he had killed; he had killed a man, in an orchard, a man who did not want to die. If Emily knew he had killed him, the last of her love, that poor candle-flame he was sheltering against his breast, would die, and then she would hate him, and then he would kill something else—himself.

He rose from his knees, and looked out of the window; the rain pattered suddenly against the glass, and darkness crept up the sky. His thoughts began to move backwards and forwards with freakish inconsequence, now showing him the future in imagination, and now the past in memory. At last he disentangled a retrospect. It seemed strange that only a week had gone by since that hideous dawn. He surveyed the week; the first day was as clear as the last. He remembered Dunk's arrival and awestruck inspection of "the body," the grains of common sense which he and Mrs. Hodder added to their master's chaff-load of excitement, the lad's departure for the doctor, the doctor's arrival, disagreeable questions and letter to the coroner's officer, the removal of Oliver's body, and what the grass looked like afterwards.

These had been the chief events of the day, but they had a background, and that was Emily sitting by the kitchen fire, shivering. Nothing seemed able to warm her; he had heated bricks for her feet, he had recklessly piled up the fire, he had gone numb in the wind that she might wear his coat over her own thin jacket, he had chafed her hands and tried to warm them in his breast, and still she shivered, in silence, with big, terrified eyes, as a poor little dog or cat shivers, from fright as well as from cold.

The next morning he wanted her to stay in bed, but she insisted on getting up, declaring that she felt better. She was warmer, certainly; her cheeks were flushed, and her skin was burning and dry. She struggled through her morning duties, but in the afternoon he found her in a chair, shivering again. He wanted to fetch a doctor, but she refused to see one, with a vehemence that startled him—"No, no, no! she was all right—it was only a cold"—and

when he persisted, she burst into tears, and was to be soothed only by his promise that she should have her way.

The next day and the next it was the same. Each morning she declared that she was better and would not stay in bed, though she had coughed half the night. She would come downstairs in an odd assortment of her garments and his, and sit by the fire, sometimes shivering, sometimes burning, and always thirsty.

The sight of her was more than he could bear, and once, on the evening of the second day, he fell on his knees beside her and asked her pardon.

"Don't call yourself so many names," she said wearily; "after all, I bit you first."

"But even then I'd no right—— O God! what a cur I am!"

"Well, I was a cat that day—cat and cur—this is what it's made of us—cat and cur."

She saw that he was half in tears, and, putting her arms round him, she drew his head against her breast.

She was too ill to attend the coroner's inquest, which the next day brought the smell of fustian into their tragedy. Dunk's stammering testimony, the doctor's quick, business-like voice, the Benenden policeman's evidence, delivered in the language of police, and his own form, oafishly attired in his best black coat, stood out of the haze in Claude's memory. Miss Kingsley was represented by her solicitor, and, strange to say, it was the sight of this worthy man which first seared into Shepherd's heart the moral necessity for a confession of his share in Mills's death. He felt that he ought to tell the aunt that he might have saved her nephew; she doubtless considered him morally responsible for his suicide, and he longed to tell her that he was actually so. He was goaded to such a pitch with this idea that when he stood up to give evidence he half thought of finishing with a confession of his guilt; but by the time he had answered all the coroner's questions, he was congratulating himself on having avoided anything that might have aroused

suspicion of that which ten minutes before he had been panting to confess.

The jury brought in a verdict of "Suicide whilst temporarily insane," attaching no rider of censure, and, on the whole, Claude left the court less dirty than he had expected. Most of those present knew his story, so he had no character to lose; besides, Oliver's guilt, brought to light at the inquest with other relevant and irrelevant personalities, took away to some extent, according to the ethics of a country jury, the blackness of Shepherd's. One of the jurors, from whom he had occasionally bought roots, drove him part of the way back in his trap, and, before depositing him at the Flit Wells, advised him to go straight home and settle it with the missus.

The missus was sitting as usual in her chair, trying childishly to mend her shoes with needle and cotton.

"Well?" she asked as he came in.

He sat down and told her.

"Well?"

"That's better than you thought it'ud go off, ain't it?"

"Yes, I think it is."

"And now," he said, crossing his knees, and thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, "what—what about getting married?"

"It's rather soon to think of that," faltered Emily.

"I don't see why."

Emily was silent.

"I shall see old Body about this place," he continued, "and ask him to let me assign, or sublet, or something. I think we ought to leave here, and go somewhere where we can forget the past."

"Where's that?" said Emily.

"We can go to Canada, if you like—emigrate."

Again Emily was silent.

"Come, Em, dear, we really must settle these things."

"My head aches so to-night, and my throat's all dry; it hurts me to talk. Claude, please give me a drink."

Emily was not the one to complain of bodily ills. He

looked into her feverish, mysterious eyes, and knew that she was feigning. He gave her to drink, then looked at her again and kissed her.

"Em, you still love me—after all I've done?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"As much as before?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I shouldn't say 'Yes' if I wasn't."

She was still feigning. God help him!

Every look he was compelled to take at the circumstances of Oliver's death brought them farther within his horizon of remorse. At first they had loomed, no bigger than a man's hand, far away; his commerce with them in the coroner's court had fetched them to the meridian; but as the days went by, his heaven became exceeding black with clouds. One evening he found Emily crying, and after some persuasion dragged from her the confession that she cried because of the share she thought she had had in Mills's suicide.

"It was my fault—I drove him to it—and then, when he came to me that night I spoke harshly to him, because he wouldn't see that he was as much to blame as I. I drove him desperate—and then I left him. I didn't realize that he wasn't fit to be left—I didn't want him to see me cry, so I ran away upstairs—I was a selfish fool. His blood's on my head. Claude, you're surely not laughing!"

"No, girl, of course not. This ain't the way I laugh." But he knew that he was. He laughed to think what Emily would say if she knew all that lay at his door—a guilt beside which her self-accusings were indeed a matter for laughter.

He often felt that he would have no peace till he had confessed his sin to her, whom it most intimately concerned. At first the blackest debt of his reckoning had seemed those blows he had given her in passion in the orchard; now he began to see that he had already paid away his manhood before they were put to his account. To confess to her

would be far worse than to confess to Miss Kingsley, and was therefore, according to the new mood of his conscience, more imperative. At first he had looked on this as mere morbidity, but now it seemed to him the trumpet-call of righteousness, summoning to a war from which there was no discharge.

It was these increasing storms, joined to Emily's increasing illness, that drove him to the idol whose temple he had despised. He began to see the hand of God, avenging, snaring, and slaying. All his daily work, such as it was, was continually haunted by His terror. He read His blasting omnipotence and wrath in his unfruitful fields and languishing stock, and most of all in the woman in her chair. Oh, that woman in her chair! It was she who was paying him the wages of sin—paying him in his own coin, to the uttermost farthing. He had allowed a man who loved life to die because of a freak, a passion, a momentary burst of bravado, without lifting a hand or a foot to save him; and now he must watch one, whose life he loved, die, and, as before he was unwilling, now be unable, to move hand or foot for her health.

"Em," he said wretchedly once, "I believe you're trying to kill yourself; you won't go to bed or see a doctor because you want to die."

"No, indeed it's not that, Claude. I promise you that I'll see a doctor if I get really bad. But this is nothing—only a chill. I caught it that morning."

"You've had it a week, and you don't get better. It must be something worse than a chill. I insist on your seeing a doctor."

"You can't insist. No doctor has power to examine me against my will. Do let things be, Claude. I'm simply sick of this wrangling."

It was in vain that he entreated, coaxed, and stormed. Though in other matters she was meek as a child, in this she stood firm. Sometimes he was furious at her perverseness, but most often he was sick with alarm. He could not tell what ailed her, and ignorance increased his panic. Her

cough, her difficult breathing, the pain in her side, made him fear that her lungs were affected. Uneducated people —and Claude's education, in physiology as well as theology, had not yet gone deeper than his skin—regard lungs with more awe and ignorance than any other organ of the body. Consumption, pneumonia, bronchitis, were all vaguely classed in Claude's mind as "lungs." Failing qualified assistance, he tried to doctor her himself. She seemed to like the hot drinks he made her, and once, helped by his knowledge of farriery, and in the simplicity of his heart, he made her a bran poultice for her chest—which set her laughing and coughing and crying.

He lived in an agony of apprehension. Her wasted face and her arms, no thicker than a child's, made him turn sick with terror and remorse every time he came into her presence. He would hardly ever leave her, letting the farm-work go to wrack. What were the impatient cacklings of unfed fowls, or the lowings of cows distended with milk, to the silence of this woman in her chair? He realized that when her illness was over he would probably find himself ruined, but he cared nothing for that. He would sit by her, holding her hand, till the noise of the farmyard disturbed her, and she herself would beg him to go to his work. She seldom spoke, for her cough and the pain in her chest were incessant; but he wanted no word from her—only her hand in his.

Sometimes, as he sat thus, he would think with bitterness that, after all, perhaps it would be better if she died. A suspicion, worse than the fear of death, was forming in his mind, suggesting that if she lived he would have to bear a sorrow in comparison with which her death would be sweet. Once or twice, nervously and falteringly, he had hinted at their marriage—had they not better start preparing for it, even though it could not take place just yet? She had answered evasively, ending the discussion, when he pressed her, with: "I'll see; I must think it over."

He often told himself that this reluctance and lack of interest were due to her illness, weakening desire, but at

the bottom of his heart there was a different creed—he believed that she dared not irrevocably link her fate with his. His roughness, cowardice, and ill-temper of the last nine months, culminating in the brutality of a week ago, had made her shrink from that which she might have welcomed with eucharist.

Jostling up against this horror was the sick and silly craving for shrift which again and again sent him perplexing her with strange beginnings of sentences. His conscience, which seemed to have abandoned its "peace-at-any-price" methods for the most cold-blooded jingoism, urged him not to let Emily die without knowing the worst of him. He dared not let her die deceived, and once he dashed in from the yard, panting, lest his resolution should fail, and was silenced only by finding her asleep. Then the resolution collapsed, and he realized that if she were to awake at that moment he could not utter a word.

His retrospect ended with the kiss he gave Emily when she waked, and once more he found himself with forehead pressed to the little casement-square which the wind was beginning to shake. He was very cold, but he dared not go down yet a while. He was not in the mood to meet Emily; there were moments when he positively shrank from her. She never reproached him—on the contrary, she was often pitifully tender—but he trembled to read the Mene, Tekel, Peres of her eyes—all was over, numbered, and finished; the kingdom had departed from him.

The hours wore slowly on, while the rain pattered and the wind moaned, and his mind rocked between retrospect and prayer.

"A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday." Surely some of our yesterdays were as a thousand years.

CHAPTER XXV

A CHAPTER OF DIALOGUE—CONFITEOR—A LICKING—" MY POOR LITTLE EM ! "

ON the thirteenth morning of April Claude was milking in the cowshed when a shadow fell across the straw. He looked round, then started up, face, neck, and ears flooded with the crimson of bitter shame. David Gilmour did not speak, simply held out his hand.

" Oh, sir," stammered the boy.

" Won't you take my hand ? "

Claude took it, still looking sheepishly at the ground.

" Are you surprised to see me ? Didn't you think I'd come after all that has happened ? "

" Not when I said——"

" Never mind what you said ; I've forgotten it. I hoped that you'd write to me, lad, and ask me here of your own accord—that's why I waited."

" I thought of writing to you ; I wanted to write. But I was too ashamed."

" How's Emily ? I heard she was ill."

" I don't know what's wrong with her, sir. She says it's nothing, and she won't see a doctor or stay in bed ; but she coughs so that sometimes she nearly suffocates."

" She probably has a chill of some sort," said Gilmour briskly, noticing the gulp and quiver in Claude's voice : " it's silly of her not to have a doctor in. I must see her, and try my hand at persuasion. But not just yet "—as Claude moved to the door—" finish your milking. I don't want to see her till I've had a talk with you."

Claude frowned. He wished the minister would go, for he felt that if he stayed much longer he would drag from him the bitter secrets of his heart. In childish years the story of many a little hidden scrape had been fetched to his lips by the glance of those keen eyes. Suppose he told him of his share in Mills's death. . . . He wished the minister would go.

But though Gilmour saw the frown, he leaned against Meggie's stall, and kicked Claude's milking-stool towards him. Young Shepherd sat down, and pressed his scowling forehead into the shorthorn's flank. But he still felt the glance of those keen eyes.

" What are your plans ? "

" Ain't got any."

" Aren't you and Emily going to marry ? "

" I've asked her to marry me."

" But she's too ill just now ? "

" That ain't it."

" You mean she doesn't . . ."

" I don't think she does."

Gilmour took a couple of strides across the shed. The pail was full, and Claude sat up, very red in the face. Something must be done to restore the old confidence. The lad had always been so ready in Easeham days, but this morning he mumbled and muttered, stopped in the middle of his sentences, and held down his head.

" Claude," said the minister, " haven't you anything to tell me ? "

He saw the muscles of Shepherd's throat quiver. He jerked himself up, and faced his questioner almost recklessly. All was as he had expected.

" I knew you'd get it out of me."

" Get what out ? "

" All that I've done—Mills's death."

Gilmour started.

" Oh, I didn't kill him—not actually. But if I hadn't held my tongue, he'd probably be alive and kicking now. Yes, I'll tell you ; I must tell someone, and I'd rather it

was you. I used to tell you so many things when I was a little chap. When I've told you this I don't suppose you'll ever want me to tell you anything again."

"My dear boy, calm yourself—and don't tell me anything you'll regret afterwards."

"I shan't regret it. I can't hold my tongue any longer. I'm like Em—when she doesn't tell things she feels all unclean. But perhaps you don't want to hear."

"Of course I do." Gilmour sat down on a heap of straw. But Claude remained standing, like some guilty scoundrel before his judge.

. . . "So I just stood there watching him, sir. I kept opening my mouth to shout, and moving my legs to run, but still I stood there without a sound. Then I saw him lie down . . . and then I shouted with all my might . . . but it was too late."

He had stumbled through his confessional conscientiously enough. He had not spared himself: all the twist and tangle of motive which had at last netted him and Emily at Raisins Farm; all the smouldering recklessness that had blazed up in the Cackle Street cottage when Emily leaned on the landing-rail; all the wallow of remorse and superstitious horror which had burst its floodgates on the morning of Oliver's death, and the chaos in which heart and life had been rocking ever since—he had told of all. He was glad he had told, though he knew that the minister would make him suffer for it. It was as in his boyhood's days, when he had confessed his wrongdoings to James, and had experienced a vague, delicious relief of absolution, even when pulled in consequence across his brother's knees.

But his pleasure was rudely abashed when he looked at Gilmour. Till then he had thought there was only one whose forgiveness he should ask, but now he held out his hand and cried:

"Forgive me, sir!"

The minister could not speak at first.

"Oh, lad!" he said after a pause, and added suddenly: "Thank Heaven, Emily doesn't know all this!"

"She knows pretty nearly all."

"But not what would probably strike her as the worst."

"I must tell her that."

"Why?"

Now that the question was put by a more candid friend than his own heart, Claude found it difficult to answer.

"I—I can't bear to think of a secret like this between us."

"Consider her shoulders, my boy, instead of your own. Her burden is heavy enough without your adding half yours."

"But she ought to know the worst of me."

"It might kill her. Promise me, Claude, that you will never tell her this thing."

Claude's conscience clung obstinately to the scourge.

"I—I must."

Gilmour looked at him shrewdly.

"Well, promise me that you'll tell her nothing before to-morrow."

"If you like. But what good 'ull it do?"

"A great deal, perhaps. I don't despair of your coming to your senses before to-morrow. And now we've settled to hold our tongues, let's go to see Emily."

Claude picked up the milk-pails, and he and the minister left the shed together.

The latter was thinking anxiously as they crossed the yard. His plans needed rearrangement; he had not expected to find Claude's so chaotic. He glanced uneasily at the young man with the milk-pails. He was the type least of all calculated to make the best of catastrophe—well-principled but without self-denial, well-educated but with an under-layer of coarseness, devoted and affectionate, but always—though perhaps unconsciously—ready to take advantage of a woman in her weakness. The individual streak of mingled poetry and prose only complicated his

difficulties and obscured his chances. Gilmour sighed—Emily and this lad were deeper in the mud than he had thought.

His anxieties were scarcely relieved when he entered the kitchen. Claude, in his terror of draughts, had insisted on keeping the windows shut for the last eight days, and the air reeked of dust, old plaster, and stale tobacco. Cigarette-ends were everywhere, on the table, the shelves, and the floor, where the dust also lay thick. Emily was in keeping with the general atmosphere of sickness and slovenliness; even Gilmour's masculine spirit ached with his desire to fasten up her dress and brush her hair. Her haggard face, short breath, and troubled eyes, appalled him. It was all terrible—even her greeting. She held out both her hands to him, and would scarcely let his go. He had not known he was such a dear friend; this was the welcome of one who has longed for a third party.

Claude began to lay the dinner, Mrs. Hodder having disappeared, as was her custom whenever she thought herself likely to be wanted. Once, as he passed Emily, he lifted her untidy hair and kissed her cheek. Gilmour was struck with the pathos of the fools.

"But they mustn't expect to get off without a licking," he said to himself; "I'll speak to them both about it afterwards—separately."

During the meal he tried hard to keep the conversation in commonplace channels. Claude helped him, for he was anxious to hear news of Spell Land—how the battle went with Tanhouse, how the harvests had fared, how the stock and the young seed had weathered the rain. The minister could tell him little beyond that the warfare with the Ticehursts was still hot. He believed that last autumn James and Patrick had bought up a large quantity of hops, but did not know how much. It was then Claude realized that through the storm and trouble of those months he had still kept in his heart all his interest and pride in his old home. He finished his meal in silence, thinking of Spell Land.

" And now, young man," said Gilmour, when Emily, the last to finish though she ate the least, set down her half-emptied bowl of bread and milk, " you'll be wanting to go to your work. I'll keep Emily company."

Claude rose unwillingly. He knew what Gilmour would say while he was out, and though he was glad that at last it would be said, that Emily would at last be confronted with the question he had been pining, yet not daring, to ask for days, he could not bear to think of going out to work while his fate was being decided by these two in the kitchen. He remembered how ten days ago he had waited in the outer darkness while Emily and a man more privileged than he had weighed the first and last things of his life in the balance of their will. But this afternoon, as on that night, Emily's eyes were fixed on him, begging him to go, and, as before, he went.

He took his spade, and went to the few cabbage-rows his new pastures had left. But his muscles were slack, and ached at the toil he had neglected for so long. Besides, his mind was not with his muscles, but waited in the kitchen at Nineveh for Emily's answer. In an hour he would hear it ; he would know whether or not she meant to marry him, whether her shrinking had been but for a time, the result of shock and sickness, or whether it was based on an everlasting resolution not to trust herself to the man who had proved himself unworthy even of a poor little sinner like her.

He looked up at the farmhouse, wimpled in the haze and hush of early afternoon. He was beginning to speculate. Should he see the harvesting of those apple-trees in bloom ? If not, where would he be ? where would Emily be ? He stooped hastily to his work, trying to forget, in the aching of his muscles, the aching of his heart.

It was about half-past two when, on lifting his head again, to glance at Nineveh, he saw Gilmour standing in the doorway and beckoning to him. Then probably the question was answered. He picked up his coat and his spade, feeling that he should not go back to the cabbage-

ground that day, and walked quickly, with head erect, towards the house.

" Well ? " he panted, as he reached Gilmour.

" Come in here ; I want to speak to you alone." And the minister opened the door of the outer kitchen, which was separated by the passage from the room where Emily sat.

" Has—has she told you anything, sir ?—I mean, what she wouldn't tell me."

" She promises that she'll see a doctor."

" I'm unaccountable glad of that. You've done me a service in getting her to give in there, Mr. Gilmour."

" Do you know why she wouldn't give in ? "

Claude hesitated. " She was always the one for notions."

" Well, she had a notion that she would not like the doctor to see some bruises she has on her back. He might ask her how she got them."

Claude turned hastily to the window.

" O God, sir ! I suppose you know who gave 'em to her ? "

" I do."

The boy could not speak.

Gilmour stood in the middle of the room, apparently engrossed in the raftering ; but all the while he watched the figure by the window, and saw the head sink lower on the hands.

" I thought it was just her contrariness," muttered Claude at last, " and sometimes I was furious. Do you think, sir, she didn't want him to know, because of—of me ? "

" Undoubtedly, and because of herself. She has suffered from her lungs before this, and remembers that on that occasion the doctor employed auscultation, which she imagines cannot be used without uncovering the chest and back. She wanted to hide both your shame and hers—though I must say I hardly think she realizes how ill she is. She told me that she had meant to see the doctor anyhow in another three days, if she was no better, for she thinks that by then all traces will have gone. But I've persuaded her to see him now."

Again Claude could not speak at once.

"She's true blue," he said, after a wretched silence.

"She has always been that. She has played the fool, she has sinned, she has gone under, but she has kept her colours flying all the time, and her colours are, as you say—true blue."

There was another pause—they were inevitable in such a conversation—but this was not so painful as those that had gone before.

Again Claude, though the most abashed, was the first to break it.

"And I suppose there's no use asking if—if she will marry me."

"I asked her that."

"But she won't."

"I never said so. She's really much too ill for a prolonged discussion, and we can't expect her to undertake any real searchings of heart till she is stronger. At present she's like a child—shrinking, but unable to tell you why."

"Then it's as I thought. . . ."

"I'm afraid so. She says she can't feel towards you as she felt a year ago. She loves you as much as ever, but she doesn't like you; it's an odd distinction—a woman's."

He had made his voice and his words as matter-of-fact as possible, but he knew that they cut into Claude's heart like a knife into a raw wound. The boy turned round from the window, biting his nails.

"But what 'ull she do? What 'ull become of her if she doesn't marry me?"

"She hasn't yet said definitely that she won't marry you; and surely you see that marriage is not her only chance of restoration; please get that wretched claptrap out of your head at once."

"But what can she do? Where can she go?"

"She can do a great deal, and she must go very far. Her aunt will not have her back, and anyhow it would be

bad for her to return to Easeham. I mean to write a friend of mine, a member of my old congregation at Baltimore, who has since married a ranch overseer in Saskatchewan, and is now in England. She returns to Canada in July, and I feel sure that I may ask her to take Emily with her. She is a true woman, and in her Emily will find what she now most needs, but has hitherto, strangely enough, never had—a real friend of her own sex."

"You—you don't mean to take her away?"

"How can she stay here?"

"But if she marries me?"

"I shall be the last to regret it, but we must prepare for the alternative, and as soon as Emily is well enough to be moved she must go to one whom I believe she must have unconsciously longed for all these dreadful months—a good woman."

"My God! this is more than I can bear. . . ."

"The only remedy for 'can't' is 'must.' This is your chance of restitution. Don't finish what you have begun by forcing her again to act against her better self. I know I'm talking brutally, but you ought to have your share in this atonement—all the more so because it raises her up and leaves you where you are. Help her to recover all you've taken away. It's so much more than you've lost yourself."

Claude's chin shot up angrily. "You're middling hard on me, sir. You talk as if I'd ruined Emily and gone to the dogs just for the sport of the thing. After all, other people have had their fingers in this mess, and circumstances have been against me all through. Emily came with me of her free will; she put her hands in mine, and said, 'I'm going with you, Claude.'"

"You mustn't blame circumstance for that. That was when you were given your great chance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when she put herself utterly in your power, to save or to ruin, in all her ignorance and her

despair and her trust—that was when the Divine Love and Wisdom gave you your great chance."

Claude turned once more to the window.

"You're a hard man, Mr. Gilmour," he muttered.

"Well, you deserve a licking, don't you?"

"I suppose I do, sir, but you might ease off a moment."

There was a break in the boy's voice which made the minister's kinder.

"I'm sharp-tongued, lad, I know. But it sickens me to see you laying the blame of your own evil choice on the Human-Divine Who has striven with your folly all these years. What you call circumstance is only the working of inviolable laws which you yourself have set in motion. God's laws are not like men's laws, with an arbitrary and often incongruous penalty attached, which He may inflict or not inflict, as He pleases. They carry their punishments packed up inside 'em, so that when we break 'em, we ourselves let the consequences loose."

"Well, what am I to do?"

"I want you first of all to face the consequences of what you have already done—and I want you to help Emily to work out her salvation; that's the only way you can hope to find yours."

"But how can I help her if she goes away?"

"Simply by letting her go. I'm sorry for you, lad—I'm sorry for you both. One consequence of breaking Law is that you have to walk over the pieces—with your naked feet, sometimes. Don't think I haven't done it—I know how one bleeds. You and Emily have been punished by that wherein you sinned—each other. It is you who have given her her flogging, and she who has to give you yours. You have dashed her trust in you to pieces, and she denies you the reparation you long to make. There you stand, poor children, and I would to God I could help you better than this."

He was silent, his lips twitching violently. Claude still

leaned on the window-sill, his head in his hands. Gilmour waited for him to speak, and at last came the words which the minister, with his knowledge of the lad's true nature, had expected in his heart :

" My poor little Em ! O God ! my poor little Em ! "

CHAPTER XXVI

SURRENDER—HARMONY—"DO YOU REMEMBER DOUCEGROVE?"

AT three o'clock Gilmour set out for the station, Claude walking with him as far as Benenden, where he was to call at the doctor's house. He had asked him to spend the night at Nineveh, but the minister had shaken his head.

"I'll be over to-morrow, lad, and you'll remember your promise—not a word to shock poor Emily till then."

"I'll remember right enough. But I wish you'd stay, sir."

"I can't. I've business I must attend to, and some letters to write—one of them to this Canadian friend I told you of." Claude winced. "I hope to find matters have gone a good deal further by to-morrow. You must have a talk with Emily, and see how what I've told you fits in with what I've told her."

"I don't suppose it'll do any good. She's made up her mind to leave me, I reckon—and I don't blame her, considering there's not a good thing come my way but that I've turned it into a bad un, herself included."

Gilmour smiled faintly. "When I first saw you, as a little chap, you were trying to raise the devil, and that's typical of what you've been doing, man and boy, ever since. But here we are at the doctor's house; I'll say good-bye, and high time too, you'll be thinking. This taste of my jaw ought to last you your life."

Claude shook hands in silence, and watched him

disappear round the bend of the road, before he opened the doctor's gate. He wondered what doom would have been spoken when he and the minister met again.

Dr. Pratt was fortunately in, and drove with Claude at once to Nineveh. His examination was not a long one.

"She must go to bed at once," he said; "it's a case of pneumonia. I should have been sent for long ago."

"Is there any danger?"

"There's always danger in a case like this."

Another question trembled on Claude's tongue, but he dared not ask it.

"The fact is," continued the doctor, "her heart isn't sound, and, apart from actual disease, she is in a weak, unsatisfactory state of health. She seems worn out and ill-nourished. You tell me she hasn't been really well since her confinement, over a year ago. Her case demanded the most careful diet and the most absolute rest."

"She hasn't had either of 'em here."

"I can tell that." The doctor frowned; he had seen the patient's shoulders. "But keep up your spirits," he added more kindly; "it will be bad for her if she sees you're anxious. She has no idea that she's very ill, which is all in her favour. I make a point of never letting my patients know how bad they are; mind has such power over matter that if a man thinks he's dying he'll very probably die when otherwise he might easily have pulled through. She must have a nurse, of course; I'll drive to Hawkhurst at once, and send her a nice woman over."

When he was gone, Claude went back into the house.

"He says you must go to bed, Em."

"I'm going," she replied meekly.

Her stubbornness having broken down on one point, she was obedient in all. She let him carry her upstairs and sit her on the bed; she made no demur even when he told her of the nurse. He left her to undress, and went out into

the garden. The daffodils were in flower, and their faint spring smell made him realize how acceptable they would be to the poor girl upstairs, as she lay in the low, musty room where she had spent so many wretched nights. It was the thought of Emily, too, which reminded him of milking-time. She had better have some milk before she went to sleep.

As he walked towards the pasture, to call in the cows, he noticed that an atmosphere of ending and changing seemed to brood over the farmstead. He looked back on it, as it were ; it had no future. Through an entirely tacit process he had come to acquiesce in Gilmour's plans ; he was resigned—more or less—to the thought of Emily's going away, and if she went he would not linger. Nineveh had been terrible enough with her ; without her—or, rather, with her memory—it would be hell.

He was conscious of a greater gentleness as he fed the dumb brutes that evening ; the stupid cackle of the chickens and ducks, the dull lowing of the cows in the milking-shed, no longer irritated a sore heart, but stirred the pity of a loving one. David Gilmour's words had been like iodine—some burning and stinging at the application, and then a sweet, increasing relief. As he leaned his forehead against Pretty's red side, and her milk hissed into the pail, he was vaguely conscious of this growing calm, in spite of the realization of all he had lost and was about to lose, which was growing with it. The two emotions flourished together, and as the minutes went by seemed almost to graft together.

He realized that the end of all things was at hand—the end of sinning and the end of loving. Emily would leave him, he was certain, either through death or her own wish. Both partings seemed equally irrevocable, for if she left him to accompany Gilmour's friend to Canada, could he hope ever to see her again ? He would still love her, and she would still love him—for a time ; then the love of both would pine as it fed more and more on imagination and memory, till at last either she loved an imaginary Claude,

who had never been, or had been very long ago, and he an imaginary Emily, or love died at last, but not without an ugly scar of barren earth to mark his grave.

For a moment a wild, tender hope leapt up in his heart, that she would forgive and give. But he dared not trust it. In these calm moments, his heart sounding to the diapason of peace and renunciation, he knew all he was and all he had been. He had given Emily a wretched year, such as it falls to the lot of few women to endure. He had been at once her tempter and her punisher, her seducer and her house of correction. If she became his, could he promise her happiness? Had he any reason to suppose that his whole nature had been changed by ten days' unhealthy remorse? Dared he ask her to bear with him any longer after all she had borne? He would not ask. Gilmour was right; she should make her own choice. If she thought her poor battered love enough to glorify their rags, he would give thanks and try to be worthy; but if she dared not trust her body to the man who had abused and beaten her, or her soul to the man who had led her innocence astray, he would bow his head in submission, and let her carry her wounded love to where it could die in peace.

It was five o'clock when he went indoors to Emily. She was in bed, and at first he thought her asleep, but as he came towards her she opened her eyes and tried to sit up. He lifted her.

"It's so hard to breathe lying down," she said, smiling faintly, "and I want to speak to you, Claude."

"You mustn't tire yourself, darling."

"I won't; but there are so many things I want to say. Mr. Gilmour told you what he and I had arranged?"

"That you're to go away?"

"Yes, as soon as I'm well enough to be moved. He's going to write to a friend of his, and ask her if she'll take me with her out to Canada. He says I must start everything afresh. He was very stern."

"To you, dear?"

" I deserved it ; I'm a regular bad un, Claude. If I hadn't been such a funking idiot to start with, if I hadn't married Oliver without really thinking what I was doing, we shouldn't both be so miserable now."

" Em dear, you mustn't leave me. . . ."

He bent over her, his arm across her, and her eyes filled and overflowed. The sight of his own eyes, bright with sorrow, and not without their long-lashed fascination, the vigorous limbs, the sweat, the sinew of the man who for nearly a year had worked for her and loved her, in spite of his unworthiness, pierced her heart. Her poor little bosom heaved under the sheet, and a great fit of coughing choked her.

" Oh, Claude . . ." she panted.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped her mouth.

" You mustn't cry, Em ; it makes you cough. All this is my fault, not yours. I deserve the worst you can give me. But tell me—have you quite made up your mind ? Have I no hope ? "

" I haven't made up my mind ; I can't. I wish I could explain everything—I don't want you to misunderstand me—I feel so heavy and confused, and it hurts to speak."

" Shall I tell you what I think you want to tell me ? I've been such a brute to you that, though you still love me, you can't respect me or trust me any longer, and you dare not give yourself to me. That's it, ain't it, dear ? "

He, too, might have said, " It hurts to speak."

" That's rather what I feel, but not exactly. I feel all frightened, somehow. I can't explain. Perhaps some day, when I'm a bit clearer, I'll be able to think things out, and tell you. You must be patient with me, Claude. Oh, I feel so wicked, so faithless—and yet these last few months have been as if someone was tearing down all I cared for in life and making me trample on it."

Once more the tears began to roll down her cheeks, and Claude became alarmed.

"Don't cry, Emily. I can't bear it. Don t—you never used to cry."

"I'm a silly fool now; I can't help it; besides, you're crying too."

"I ain't; these are your tears on my face. But, Em, I can't bear to think that now I've knocked you down you won't let me help you up; that other folk who never hurt you 'ull give you a hand, and I—I'll be just the man that ruined you."

"Nonsense! Besides, I've told you, dear—I haven't made up my mind. Sometimes I think there must be some good way out of all this. But I'm rather tired to-night. I should like to sleep a little while—not for long."

"Mr. Gilmour said I was to talk over with you what he said to me, and see how it fitted in with what he said to you. But we'll leave that till to-morrow; you must have a rest now."

"Yes—and I don't want to think of these things just for an hour or two. I want to live as if all—all—this had never happened. I want to go to sleep thinking that you and I are what we used to be."

"You've a good imagination, Emily."

"I'm glad I have. Do you remember how you and I used to 'make believe' together when we were kids? and how we used to read books together in the plum-tree?"

"It doesn't make me happy to remember these things."

"It does me; I like dreaming of 'em, too. I dreamed last night that you and I were reading *Lavengro* together."

She shifted her head on the pillow, looked up into his face, and sighed a little. Then a strange look, almost of roguishness, leapt into her eyes.

"Do you remember Doucegrove? Weren't we fools!"

He was stooping over her to tuck in the sheet, and she put up her hands, laying them on his hair, then drawing them down his cheeks, and finally holding his chin between their palms. All the while her eyes danced with that

strange merriment which he had never seen in them before, her lips parted playfully, and her cheeks would have dimpled had they not been so thin. It was not the accustomed Emily—the tired, disappointed, disease-worn Emily—that looked up at him from those pillows, but the laughing, happy, high-spirited girl that she might have been. For one moment, surely, life had shown her her riddle answered and her wrong set right. Still smiling, she dropped her hands, clenching them on her bosom, as was her custom when she slept.

It was six o'clock, and the sun, sloping westward, flung a golden square on the wall above Emily's head. Claude, too, was drowsy, and thought he would rest. He lay down on the couch at the foot of the bed, and shut his eyes.

Emily tumbled and tossed as usual. Once or twice he thought she was awake, and whispered her name, but there was no answer, and in a few minutes he found himself dozing, dreaming a stupid dream in which Swedenborg and the red shorthorn were cheek by jowl. Then suddenly he saw a sallow-rimmed dingle, patchworked with sunlight, and Emily sitting by a fire kindled among woodsedge. He came towards her, feeling in disgrace, but she lifted her face and smiled at him, her eyes full of roguishness. The air suddenly quivered with whirring wings, as a multitude of birds flew out of the sallows, and wheeled about their heads.

He woke, and the whirring, wheeling sound was still in the room. He sat up, and saw that the last sunlight was ruddy in the trees, and inside, blundering against the ceiling, was some poor swift that must have just flown in through the open window. Claude rose softly to drive him out, but he had lost all the grace and directness of his sunset skimmings, dashed hopelessly into the mirror, then was clinging to the text on the wall, then had fluttered over the bed, nearly brushing Emily's cheek. Claude feared he would wake her, and went hastily to her side. He looked down on her ; then straight into his heart shot

a mortal fear. He stooped over her, listening; she had used to breathe stertorously, but now . . . her hands were clenched on her bosom, as was her custom when she slept.

He lifted himself, and the swift darted from the bed-rail, then, suddenly seeing his deliverance, flew out into the dusk.

CHAPTER XXVII

GOOD OR EVIL—THE DROP OF THE BALANCE—SCARING SPARROWS—THE VICTORY OF SPELL LAND

IT was on the afternoon following the twilight when Emily had said, " I should like to sleep, but not for long," and yet had never waked, that David Gilmour, according to his promise, came to Nineveh. The yard looked deserted in the windy sunshine, and the house seemed empty too. He went upstairs, and there, under the low sagging roof, lay Emily, Claude stretched across the bed at her feet. Both seemed asleep, but soon the minister saw that only one of them slept. He did not rouse the lad at once, but knelt down by the bed where the poor couple lay—in the abandoned, reposeless attitude of sleeping youth—and prayed that love might comfort each at waking. Then he gently roused Claude, a little fearful, in spite of prayer, of what the waking man might be. He proved, in fact, a sorry fellow, dull, stupid, dazed, seeming scarcely to realize all that had happened.

The minister himself felt stunned by what he had seen. Emily's death was so unexpected, and, on the face of it, so cruel. But, as the numbness of amazement passed, he realized that her death was both physically natural and spiritually necessary. After all, this was the best that could have befallen these two : it had spared them both the fulness of disillusionment ; it had given them both the only chance of peace.

His faith was heavily taxed at first ; at first there was little sign of peace. Gradually the merciful torpor slipped from Claude, leaving him naked to the scourge. Gilmour

hardly spoke to him ; he made him come downstairs and take some tea, the first food he had tasted that day ; but he served the body only, the soul he would not approach. Many men, he knew, would see in this an opportunity for spiritual awakening, but one glance at the stooping, abject figure, with its drawn mouth and lustreless eyes, was enough to make the Swedenborgian recoil from the thought. He was true to his master's teaching : " No one can be reformed in a state of calamity. To think of God under such circumstances only is not from God, but from self ; for the mind is then, as it were, imprisoned in the body, thus not in freedom, and therefore not under the influence of reason, without which there can be no reformation."

" Eat a good tea, lad," said Gilmour gently.

When Claude went up to Emily at dusk he saw that someone had unclenched her hands and folded them on her breast, and also had combed and brushed her hair, so that when he took a tress of it in his hand it looked far lovelier than he had ever seen it in life, when sorrow and sickness had made her neglect it. " Who would have thought the dead could have such hair ? " He wanted to cut off a lock of it, but was withheld by a strange exaggerated scruple—he had taken enough from her while she was alive ; now that she was dead he would take no more, not even a hair of her head.

The next day a sick restlessness gripped him. He left the house at eight, ostensibly to work, but when Gilmour went to call him to dinner he was nowhere to be seen, and it was not till nearly supper-time that he came in, white as a sheet, and covered with dust and sweat, having tramped nearly thirty miles.

For the next day or two it was the same. He was rarely in the house, eluding the most careful vigilance. He seldom spoke to Gilmour, seldom thought of him. All he knew was that, whenever he came home, hot food was always ready, that he was occasionally asked to go to bed, but not pressed when he refused. He wished Mrs. Hodder would not cry so much. What a fool she was ! What was

there to cry for ? The dead deserved no pity ; they could sleep.

It is the living who wake, so savage of heart that sleep takes fright at them ; who wander, when the dead lie still, through wet, dark lanes at night ; who go past the quiet cottages where the husband sleeps beside his wife, and the mother beside her child, and the young lads together, so that there is no waking to cry out for one who is not there ; who see under the stars the ewe lick the wool of the sleeping lamb, and hear at dawn the whimper of mated birds. The gipsy lad lies with the gipsy lass under the hedge ; he may cut her throat to-morrow, but for to-night they are happier than the man who stirs the growling of their dog, who wanders up lane and down lane, through dusk and dark, till good or evil find him.

Emily was buried in Benenden Churchyard, to an accompaniment of irrepressible life and love—the racket of birds in new-sprouting trees, the scamper of lambs at play in the Parsonage field. Claude and Gilmour were the only mourners. The rest of the world seemed shamelessly, almost tipsily, glad.

The minister had written to Miss Kingsley to tell her of her niece's death, but he had not expected her to come to the funeral. He knew that she was preparing to leave Easeham. The scene of Mills's youth and education had become unbearable to her, and she was taking herself and her scanty means to a boarding-house in West Kensington. Gilmour was sorry for her ; her life had had all too few high places for sacrifice, and now the last had been laid low.

Claude stood silently beside his friend, wearing that awkward oafish look which seemed inseparable from any attempt to conform to the civilization of black clothes. In corduroy or drab he might look horsey, even, on rare occasions, coarse, but it was only in black respectability that he looked a yokel.

When the service was over he turned away without a word. The young curate who had read it looked anxiously

after him, simple goodness atoning for any lack of experience by urging him to offer words of hope and consolation, and simultaneously telling him they would be useless. Gilmour, with all his philosophy, had learned no more than that. All he could do was to hold his tongue as he and the boy tramped home against the wind, through the riotous tenderness of an April swale, already encroached in the east by storm and night.

As soon as they reached Nineveh, Claude changed his clothes and went to the milking-shed. Gilmour hoped the work would cheer his spirits, but he was still mumchance when he came in to tea. The clouds were creeping up the sky, and in the premature darkness Shepherd's face showed pinched, white, and strangely delicate, as if even the most despairing, remorse-ridden, blind-eyed grief had in it a touch of civilizing divine. Suddenly he rose, and left the room without a word, carrying a little piece of cake in his hand.

The minister thought he had gone to finish his meal out of doors, but the evening drew on apace, and he did not return. It was beginning to rain, and the orchard trees were bending and battering their boughs together. Gilmour thought he would soon be back, but he did not come in for supper or for bed. All night long the rain beat on the panes of Nineveh, and the wind howled in the thatch. The minister paced restlessly up and down the kitchen and the passage; this was an exasperating prank of Claude's—what did he mean by it? Early the next morning he asked the help of two farm-hands at Great Nineveh, and set out on a search. But there was no trace of the wanderer; no one had seen him, or heard his lagging footsteps in the dark.

Gilmour was back at the farm, anxious to the point of storming at the tear-stained and useless Mrs. Hodder, when Claude suddenly staggered in. His clothes were torn and draggled with mud and dew; he could not eat, but muttered something about having spent the night under a hedge at Soul's Green, as the minister helped him to bed.

He slept all that day and all that night, but more restlessly, waking late the next morning, to lie watching the golden, leaf-chequered blind. His legs ached with rheumatism, and the monotonous, depressing pain routed all further attempts at sleep, though he made many in his exhaustion of body and soul. Gradually memory kindled, and flickered over his roofless night. He heard the steady patter of rain on the hedge, felt and smelt the wet grass under his cheek, felt and tasted the shameful salt rush of tears. The thought of that night and its drenched and shivering despair preyed on his low vitality. Heaven save him from such another ! And yet the future had possibly a thousand and one such nights in store.

He sat up in bed, and miserably rubbed his aching thighs. Since Emily's death he had had many dreary awakenings, but none so dreary as this. Till that morning sorrow had always been more or less a stimulant, quickening the blood and tickling the imagination, but to-day it lay as a heavy cold stone in his heart, which ached and ached—like his poor legs. He made no attempt to connect heart and legs except by comparison ; he did not associate his spiritual prostration with his physical weakness. He told himself that this sterile despair was but the process of time, petrifying and mortifying that which, with all its anguish, had at least been alive. It was folly to say time heals and hallows ; time is a gangrene. Three days after Emily's death his sorrow for her had no longer been a simple sense of loss, but a festering complication of bereavement and self-hatred. For time had corrupted grief with remorse, and he did not mourn for her death so much as for the circumstances in which she had died. She had died through his fault—" For all men kill the thing they love "—she had died thinking ill of him, and—paradoxically, more terrible still—she had died without knowing the worst. This morning to remorse was added despair, a heavy-lidded hopelessness, compared to which his earlier sorrow had been a child's load.

His legs ached so terribly that he had not the patience

to stay in bed. He rose, and went over to the window, pulling up the blind, and throwing wide the casement. The wind was up, shaking the trees of Scullsgate, and fanning his hot, damp neck. A pink cloud of blossom floated from the orchard, and eddied slowly down among the buttercups of the pasture. It was spring, but the spring of the orchard where Oliver had killed himself and he had beaten Emily.

If at that moment he could have chosen between Emily's return and oblivion of Emily, he would have chosen the latter, and at that moment the latter seemed, if anything, the more impossible. He would never forget her, and the double load of his sin and hers would bow down his back all the journey through. After all, he had no cause to reproach himself on Mills's account. Mills was a lucky devil. Mills was dead.

How much cleaner the world would be if he, too, were dead—if he had died two nights ago under that hedge, died like a dog, the only death he was fitted to die! But here he was, alive and kicking, with possibly sixty years of remorse and regret ahead of him. His rheumatism was very painful, but it was not acute; he would not die of it—no such luck!

He bowed his head on his hands, and at that moment a robin chirped his sharp signal-note from the thatch above the window. Lucky little brute! It had only a year or two to live at most; but take twenty-four from eighty——

Claude suddenly swung round into the room, slamming the casement with a crash that sent the robin fluttering from the eaves. Where is the use of splitting one's head with subtraction, when with a single sweep one can wipe the whole sum off the slate? It is not only one man's privilege to die in an orchard——

Shepherd by no means realized this for the first time; his possible exit had been lighted up ever since the last act of his tragedy; but he had hitherto shrunk from it, setting his face to a dreary twisting labyrinth of years, hoping at the end of much wandering and stumbling to see the stars. This morning he found himself turning almost eagerly to the unknown, the faint prick of physical fear being an

ecstatic relief to his numbness of soul. This morning an important change had taken place in the camps of life and death, and Claude's body, which had hitherto fought sturdily against the idea of dissolution, was now allied with his heart and mind in clamouring for rest. The triple alliance of body, soul, and spirit was too formidable for a few raw scruples which might have withstood the two latter alone. An empty stomach will often bring down the scale which has only trembled with the load of an empty heart.

The boy's youth did not show the fight one would have expected; indeed, any stir it made was on the enemy's side. The stinging lusts of youth, the hopefulness and the cocksureness, were dead, and all that survived was a certain incorrigible love of coincidence, which told Claude, even in his hour of anguish, that it would be appropriate, as well as peaceful, to lie dead in that long grass, beneath those cherry-flowers. He was young enough to be impressed by the fitness of such an end—death in the orchard where Oliver had died and Emily's loving trust in him had been given its death-blow. It would be a dignified end, which might atone for the sordidness of much that had gone before. But, above all, it would be The End—that was its chief allure, appropriate or inappropriate, dignified or undignified.

. . . It would be quite easy to go downstairs, take the gun with which Oliver had shot himself, go to the orchard where Oliver had died, and blow out his brains.

His resolution could not have been more complete if it had followed weeks of balanced thought, instead of being the sudden materialization of distant and dim ideas. Its fixedness atoned for its abruptness, and, though it had not been made ten seconds, he was as familiar with the thought of his own death as with the thought of Emily's. To blow out his brains had all of a sudden come to appear as natural and as necessary as to wash his feet or eat his dinner.

He pulled on his trousers and left the room, his face hot, his hands cold. The house seemed empty as he stole

downstairs. Gilmour was probably in the yard; the care of it had of late fallen largely on his shoulders. With unhesitating yet clammy fingers he took his gun from the kitchen wall, and went out. The wind met him invitingly, drying the damps of pain and restlessness on his forehead, tempting him to the high fields by the road. But he was resolved to die in the orchard, which had suddenly become a great symbol, a pure correspondence, the gulf of Mettius Curtius, which could be closed only by his leaping into it.

He walked quickly along the garden path, his chin up, his limbs trembling, and had nearly reached the orchard, when the click of a gate made him start and turn his head. Tapner, the Benenden postman, was coming down the farm-drive towards him, and Shepherd coloured with mingled alarm and disgust, for Tapner's presence meant delay and possibly detection. In spite of himself, however, he began to wonder why the man was there. The post came so seldom to Nineveh that, even at that catastrophic moment, he stopped to marvel and surmise. Had anyone written to him, or was the letter for Gilmour? Probably for Gilmour, who was no moping outcast, not worth a man's ink. He realized that his conjectures were childish and inconsequent. What was a letter to him now? What were all the miserable concerns of the miserable world he was about to leave? But he could not very well go into the orchard while Tapner was in view; he must wait till the fellow had left, and beware of raising his suspicions by eccentric behaviour.

"Letter for me?" he asked stiltedly, his voice throttled by the effort to appear unconcerned, combined with the realization that, in spite of all, he was actually eager for Tapner's reply. The letter might be from Spell Land. . . .

"Yes, muster, a letter fur you, surelye." And Claude was fumbling a cheap envelope addressed in a wandering, familiar hand.

"Fine mornun, muster!"

"Uncommon. I'm out to scare off those hemmed little sparrows." The words appealed to that sense of fitness

which at once urged and qualified his despair. He remembered that he had told Emily a lie about sparrow-scaring on the day when the orchard drank up its first blood. Then suddenly he noticed the postman's surprised stare at his naked feet, half hidden in the loam of the path, and with a hurried " Morning ! " he marched away.

He climbed the orchard paling, then stopped to examine his letter. The postmark was Easeham, and the writing James's. James had probably written to condole with him ; his suffering had cloaked his sin, and honest men might now approach him under the chaperonage of pity.

His lip curled a little as, his gun under his arm, the ants crawling over his bare wet feet, he tore open the envelope. But gradually his expression softened. Here at last was news of Spell Land. He had heard no first-hand news of the old farm for nearly a year. He had waited for it so long, and it had come only just in time. He would read the letter before he died . . . he would have liked to have seen his brothers, too . . . they were good fellows, James and Pat.

They had never been indulgent, but he realized that all through his life they had " treated him decently." He owed to them in a great measure the qualities of his childhood, and the follies of later years were no doubt to a large extent due to the fact that he had slipped out of their hands. He could not date any idiotic or cubbish propensity farther back than the day when they had given over thrashing him.

" Dear Claude,

" You may be surprised to hear from me, but I am writing to tell you that we have lost something like £2000, which was mostly on account of them hops which we bought last autumn. We could not get our price for them, and they rotted in warehouse. It is the Lord's Doing. I do not remember such rain and wet and nastiness since '83. Me and Pat have reckoned that it will pay best to cut down all round, and not try and hang on, which would only get us broke. We are selling Meadow Land for £1000 to a fellow in London who wants to start model farming, and have

mortgaged the 200 acres next Coatham Green to old Spears the butcher what was. We are turning off Hornblower and Willsher and the Meadow Land lads, and are only keeping Blackman and Dawes. I have sacked Miss Wellings, or she would have married Patrick as sure as eggs, which would have been cheap but uncomfortable. I am getting a £14 girl for the housework. I hope you are getting on pretty well, but I expect last winter damaged you like it damaged us; such rain and muck I never did see. The Ticehursts have lost pots of money over their wheat. Don't know wheat from oats down there, I reckon. Bert had to pay 10s. last Petty Sessions for being drunk and using obscene language outside the Broad Oak. Patrick takes a drop too much now and then. I fear he has got the taste for it now, but he keeps hearty, and is getting very stout. I am sorry your young woman is dead, but you ran against the Lord with your free thinking and your free love. I am sorry to hear you did not marry her before she died, but the Lord is very merciful. I have not the heart to be Churchwarden any longer now. When I think what the farm used to be, and here we are, all sold and mortgaged, and only just missed being broke by the goodness of the Lord. And me and Pat not so young as we used to be, and Pat too stout to work much. I thought you would like to hear all this. I hope you will turn from the error of your ways, and live like an honest man, and save your soul alive. The milk trade goes well, which is one comfort.

"Your loving brother,

"J. SHEPHERD.

"P.S.—If you should ever get sick of where you are and want to come home, I don't say as me and Pat wouldn't hear of it."

It struck Claude that this must be the longest letter James had ever written. He turned it over in his hand, and frowned because of the smarting of his eyeballs. So the old home, the only mother he had known, was stripped of its glory, and his brothers were approaching the years

that should have been years of rest and honour encumbered with debts and aching with defeat. And in an indirect way he was responsible for this : if the pride of their lives, the shire stallion Prince Harold, had not died through his fault, they would never have been so goaded by the Ticehurst developments ; they would have felt secure of an advantage which would allow them to jeer at the strivings of Tanhouse. But through him they had been crippled, and reduced to a struggle beyond their strength.

Well, he would soon be out of the way, incapable of doing more harm. He was a Jonah ; he knew it. His brothers owed him a bigger grudge even than they thought ; the winter of damp and rain that had rotted their stored hops was due to him and his iniquity. The sooner he was out of this world, and the elements once more governed by the laws of Nature instead of retribution, the better for everyone.

But as his eye turned from the letter to the barrel of his gun he was conscious of a change, a kind of reconstruction. This rude and healthy contact with the actual, even though it was the actual of distress, had opened his eyes to one or two actualities ignored in the rush of his purpose. He saw the ants crawling among the bennets. The connection was hard for him to trace, but the fact remained that till he had read the letter he had never noticed the ants. Now he realized that his corpse would be overrun with them—they would crawl over his face and down his neck as he lay dead. He had not thought of that.

There was another actuality, too, with which James's letter had brought him face to face—a staggering actuality, which it was even more strange to think he could have forgotten. James's letter reminded him of James's God, the God of Thou Shalt Not and Hell Fire. It is a fearful thing for a dead man to fall into the hands of the Living God. James's God forbade suicide, and would no doubt pursue Claude Shepherd dead with even more vindictiveness than Claude Shepherd alive, because, so to speak, He had him more in His power. If he took his own life, instead

of waiting for the dreary consummation of the age, he would probably lose all chance of seeing Emily—now (according to Jacobean theology, mercifully interpreted by a Claudian gloss) winged and white-robed, with harp and crown, suddenly transformed by the physical crisis of her death into a fit comrade and housemate for Him who charged His angels with folly. The old illogical faith of his childhood had never been destroyed in Shepherd's heart. Nietzsche and his kind had been no more than a deposit of conceit, brushed off by the first genuine consciousness of sin. And as a pure faith will sometimes rise up in a man's last hour and save him, so Claude's poor motley of superstition, Philistinism, and fatalism, joined the ants in telling him that in death he would not find, either physically or spiritually, what he had expected. The bodily fear of ten minutes ago had been tolerable, even stimulating, but spiritual fear was altogether another matter. There was no more use saying, " You set your teeth, and it's all over." On the contrary, his death agonies would be but a prelude to a series of ingeniously devised tortures, rackings, and scourgings. He had not thought of that.

He opened the letter again, and glanced at the post-script. " If you should ever get sick of where you are and want to come home, I don't say as me and Pat wouldn't hear of it." That, he knew, was a direct appeal. Only the most desperate need could have urged James to commit himself to so decided an expression of desire. Poor James ! what would he say when he heard that his brother had blown out his brains ? Then there was Spell Land. . . . He shut his eyes, and pictured the ugly red house on the hill, so cheap and new and jerry-built, the oast, the barns, the pond, the poplar—home. Even at Nineveh, with Emily, he had always thought of Spell Land as " home," and he ached for its humiliation as men ache for a mother's evil fame. " Oh, Spell Land ! " he cried, as before he had cried, " Oh, Emily ! "

He wished he had not read that letter ; it had miserably unsettled him. At first the intensified self-accusing it had

brought had helped his purpose, but now his mind was becoming clearer, and he saw that the best atonement for his guilt was not death, but service. If he killed himself, what good would it do Spell Land? Not a ha'porth. The only consequence of his death would be a fresh load of grief and degradation on his brothers' shoulders, more mud on the name he professed to love. On the other hand, if he lived and went home in response to poor James's appeal, he might be able to retrieve the fortunes of the farm, to help his brothers win back what he had helped them lose. He was young and he was hale; he might yet do much for Spell Land. He had not thought of that.

But what an anticlimax! Instead of a death which should win him pity and perhaps charity, he would have to face an inglorious return, a slow retribution. Pity is all very well for a corpse, but the living man would rather do without it. As for charity, who would judge charitably the returning prodigal, humbled, defeated, working under orders for a lost cause?

It was a sudden reaction from reaction, a stiffening from what had been almost surrender, but it was no more abrupt than brief. For Claude's eyes had been opened to his first and last things, and he could no longer treat them as in the days when all he could do was dimly to feel their outline; and as a relapse is generally more serious than a first attack, Shepherd now found himself grasping more vigorously at life and anticlimax than before this momentary recoil from both.

To warning was now added pleading. Fear was being swallowed up by an even more vital and compelling motive. He lifted his eyes to the cream and blue above the trees, then dropped them to the feathery grasses and umbels blowing round the trunks. All these dainties of spring had suddenly become so many advocates of anticlimax. The sight of his own arm grown over with short dark hairs, braced by stalwart muscles, pulsing with warm blood—his very shirt-sleeve, which smelled of many milkings—planted deeper in his heart the growing, half-tearful lust of

life. Spell Land had not only brought him delay, a purely negative chance ; it had not only scared him with thoughts of corruption and damnation ; it had opened his eyes to the flowers and the clouds and the trees, to the manliness of his flesh, to the sweetness and dignity of his working-day. After all, he might as well be frank with himself—he wanted damnably to live.

He wanted something more than life. The appeal of the old home had not been made only to the cowardly animal in him or to the loving animal in him, but, by way of these, to his reasonable soul. Spell Land had found that for which Gilmour and Emily, wisdom and love, had sought in vain. Once more he heard the voices of peace and renunciation to which his ears had first been opened on the day Emily died —the diapason which had sounded so sweetly till Death pulled out the weeping *vox humana* for his " Chanson Funèbre." He wanted to live, to work, to serve—to atone.

The Spell was strong enough to reach even the accursed orchard of Nineveh. The old homespun love silenced the pleadings of despair, suppressed the treason of a sick body. Claude decided definitely for anticlimax. Bang ! bang ! The discharge of both barrels into the air salvoed the victory of Spell Land.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR ACHIEVEMENT AND ATONEMENT

THE last sunshine was drying the rain on the roadway outside Robertsbridge Station when old Soda of Spell Land trotted up, James Shepherd in the gig. James looked at his watch; he was earlier than he had bargained for. Never mind; it would do the old horse no harm to have a rest before the journey home.

Hobbs of Winter Land also sat in his trap outside the station. He stared in mingled pity and satisfaction at Shepherd, puffing stolidly at his pipe, and expectorating more freely than the best tobacco warranted. All Easeham knew the main facts of the Great Hop Tragedy, but all Easeham pined for details. Speculation ran riot in the neighbourhood and in Hobbs's head as he surveyed the owner of Spell Land. James pretended not to see him, which required some skill in feigning, as their wheels nearly touched.

"Good-evening, Mus' Shepherd," ventured Hobbs at last.

"Evenin'!"

"Waiting for the train, eh?"

"No," said James sarcastically; "I'm admirin' the view."

Hobbs shrugged his shoulders—Shepherd had no need to be so haughty. One would have thought that he had come into five thousand pounds—such his two thousand had become, put out to gossip's compound interest—instead of having lost it. Then the wind brought a whiff from James's pipe to Hobbs's nostrils, and the worthy

farmer's ire softened into compassion ; poor Shepherd used to be so particular about his tobacco.

" Have a cigar."

The badge of the yeoman farmer shot appetizingly and derisively under James's nose. He shook his head.

" No, thank ye. I've taken to pipes lately."

" I've heard you swear a pipe was nothing to a cigar," Hobbs could not help saying.

" Well, I've changed my mind—that's all. There's somethin' fast-lookin' about a cigar ; a pipe's more settled and respectable like. I don't say as for a feller like you, Hobbs, who's still at the beginnin' of most things, cigars ain't right enough ; but when you've been in the business as long as I have you'll see as it's more solid and becomin' to smoke a pipe."

Hobbs began to say that it all depended on what was in the pipe, but James, perceiving the trend of the remark, interrupted with :

" Fine weather we're havin' now."

" Not bad—and we deserve it after last winter. I never saw such a time in my life."

" Mucky," assented James.

" Bad job for you, Shepherd, wasn't it ? "

" How do you mean ? "

" Well, all them hops of yours . . ."

" Oh, farmin' always has its ups and downs."

" But being sold up, and all that," Hobbs persisted venomously ; " don't tell me it didn't hit you in the wind."

" We ain't sold up—there's only Meadow Land gone, and I reckon we'd soon have wanted to get rid of that. The place was always more trouble than it was worth."

Hobbs spat disgustedly. Shepherd was a tough un.

" Well, I'm sorry for you, all the same," he put in as a last thrust ; " it don't do to lose money so late in the day."

" We ain't broke, so there's no disgrace in it."

As the result of certain proceedings, Hobbs's father had paid his creditors tenpence in the pound.

" Waitin' for your missus ? " continued James, melting into sociability at the sight of the enemy's rout.

" That's it. I suppose you're expecting that lad of yours ? "

" I am, sir. Train's a bit late."

" I heard as he was coming home—thought he'd like a bite of fatted calf. He ! he ! "

" It's humble pie he'll have to swaller," said James grimly. The neighbourhood must at all costs be disabused of the idea that Claude was coming back to help his brothers save the farm.

" Still, it'll be a good thing for you to have the young rascal home—a broad back and strong arm, eh ? "

" I don't suppose he'll be much good at workin' yet awhile. He's been ill over at his place."

" So I heard. Serious, was it ? "

" Pretty bad, I believe—rheumaticks."

" Heard all sorts o' things about him," continued Hobbs ; " they were saying at the pub last night as how he went out mother-naked to shoot sparrers the day he was taken ill."

" He'd a shirt and trousers on. He'd been drenched through the day before, and was feelin' a bit queer, I reckon. Mus' Gilmour found him lyin' in the orchard beside his gun, too sick to get up out of the wet and go indoors."

" Poor chap ! "—lowering his voice—" been on the booze lately ? "

" Not he ! "

" That's a comfort. Gal kept him out of it, I reckon. It's strange what even a bad lot ull do for a man sometimes."

" He was just about bowled out when she died,' said James in a gentler voice. " Mus' Gilmour came round yesterday and said as he's got over it now, he thinks, but, of course, he can't forget it. He says he believes as the lad ull be less trouble to us now. Hope so, I'm sure."

" He's done a lot for him, has Mus' Gilmour, I reckon."

James was opening his mouth to assure Hobbs that any benefits Claude might have received from the minister were purely spiritual, when the scream of the Rother Valley train woke up Soda with a start, and sent him backing into the platform railings.

" Here's the train ; better late than never," said Hobbs, hitching up his reins. " I must go and help my missus out. Good luck to you, Shepherd ! "

He jumped out of the trap, and went into the station. James sat as before, a faint smile twisting the corners of his mouth. He felt that he had shown himself the better man in that encounter.

The platform was partly hidden by the booking-office, and it was impossible to see who had left the train, but a minute or two after Hobbs had gone, a pale-faced young man, dressed rather shabbily in corduroys, came towards the gig. He coloured as he met James.

" Well," said the latter, " got your box ? "

" I've given it to the carrier. He'll have it round to-night."

" Then you'd better jump up."

Claude climbed into the trap—not without some awkwardness, for his joints were still stiff—and Soda indulged in the preparatory backing which had of late become indispensable to every start.

The boy was conscious of a vague embarrassment and shyness ; he did not know what to say to his brother. James surveyed him critically.

" Well, it ain't made you any thinner." And he prodded Claude's well-covered thigh. " Fat's in the family, I reckon."

If anything, Claude had put on flesh ; but he looked older. His eyes no longer twinkled with pseudo-experience ; the real thing was stamped on his forehead and at the corners of his mouth.

They drove off slowly. The sun had set, and a chill little wind brought the scent of hops to their nostrils. James drove in silence, pulling at his pipe and staring

stolidly ahead of him between Soda's ears. By the last light Claude could see that his face was more lined than of old, and grey speckled the sandy of his hair and whiskers. He stooped, too, and his pipe was pathetic in the mouth of that epicure in nicotine ; it was the outward sign of the fall of the house of Shepherd. Claude fumbled in his pockets, and at last pulled out a silver-paper packet.

" Have some of this baccy ? "

James sniffed.

" Where did you get it ? "

" Mr. Gilmour gave it to me before he left."

" Best smoke it yourself."

" I'd rather you and Pat had it."

James's eye softened.

" Thank ye," he said, as he took a pipeful.

It was now about a fortnight since Gilmour had left three packets of King's Head behind him at Nineveh. He had thought it best that the boy should have a few weeks' solitude before he came home, and something better to smoke than five-a-penny cigarettes. Claude, though at first he missed his friend and counsellor, was not sorry to be alone. He stuck close to his acres, struggling to get them into trim for the new tenant, and seldom leaving his work except for a walk to Spring Street or Wassall, or simply to " the road," to watch the children play. His illness had shaken and subdued him, not so much on account of the physical pain he had endured as of the mental panic he had gone through. He had realized then, as never before, the desperateness of the desire that had come to him in the orchard, on the brink of death. He wanted damnably to live ; his whole being cried out for life, and sometimes he thought that the cry would be vain. There was never any real danger, but the pain and weakness brought the possibility of death before him with merciless realism. He imagined he was dying—neither the doctor nor Gilmour could persuade him to the contrary—that the death which a week ago he had longed for would now be given him, even though his longing had

been changed to loathing ; that his punishment would be, as before, a denial of atonement. Dr. Pratt was surprised at the reiterated, " Am I dying ? " Even Gilmour scarcely understood it. One result of the boy's struggle for life was that he threw off his illness far quicker than would otherwise have been the case. In a week or two he was sitting up, hollow-cheeked and feeble, but once more a safe citizen of the world he had despised.

Oh, it was good to be alive, in spite of the memory of anguish past and the dread of anguish possibly to come. He was only twenty-four, and if that meant many years in which to suffer, it also meant many years in which to achieve and atone. His atonement to Spell Land had not been snatched from him like his atonement to Emily. He had it yet in his power to give back what he had taken away, and build up what he had flung down.

These thoughts brought all the more poignantly before him the pathos of Mills's end ; another ten minutes, and he felt sure that Oliver would have felt like this, grateful for the flow of blood in his veins, for the breath in his lungs, and the bread between his teeth. Poor devil ! Claude would never forget his own share in that tragedy, nor, he realized, had he any right to ; but he now knew that the true atonement for his guilt was not death, but service, and he faced the future with determination instead of despair. His hardy attitude was all the more likely to be maintained, in that certain mists created by youth and ambition had been dispelled. He required no telling that the dish awaiting him at Spell Land was not fatted calf, but humble pie, and he was ready to leave a clean plate.

He had assigned the remainder of his lease to Wilmer of Great Nineveh, who for some time had cast a covetous eye on the acres he thought grossly mismanaged by his neighbour. He was not sorry to go ; he knew that remembrance and regret would follow him wherever he went, but he felt they would be easier to endure away from Nineveh. There memory was so strong, so vital, that sometimes it became incarnate ; and often at twilight he

had thought to see Emily standing among the hollyhocks by the garden fence, as she used to stand in a year-back summer, welcoming him home. Once he flung down his spade, and, covering his face, called to her to go away, and she went.

They reached Spell Land soon after eight o'clock. Patrick was in the kitchen, and greeted his brother effusively.

"Hello, Claudie! so you've come back. Couldn't make much of a job of it, could you, old sport? Nor could we, for that matter; as soon as we took to broking we got broke. He! he!"

"We ain't broke," said James, sitting down at the table, and stooping more than ever, "but we're precious near it. I'd have left these parts if it hadn't been for the old farm."

"Cheer up," said Claude; "we're going to get everything back again."

"I'm not so sure of that; it ain't so easy as you seem to think. Still, I won't go complainin'. It's the Lord's doin', and maybe we deserved it. I reckon it wouldn't have come upon us like this if I hadn't taken advantage of Hobbs losin' his hop-harvest to cut him out with that there stallion. It's been on my conscience a bit, and I see the Lord's providence through it all. We sinned through hops, and we've been punished through hops. It's the Lord's marvellous doin'."

The supper was brought in by the £14 girl, whom subsequent experience proved to have no talent for cooking bacon. It was just like the old days, except that neither pale-faced Dora nor red-faced Miss Wellings sat at the head of the table. Both the elder brothers grew communicative during the meal, and the story of their ambition, struggle, and defeat, was poured, warm with its pathos, into Claude's ears. Their only comfort seemed to be that the Ticehursts had also been severely damaged in the field of emulation. Dora was now definitely allied

with the enemy, and had given Patrick " the rough side of her tongue " when he sportively hinted that her husband's lately acquired habit of being fined at Petty Sessions might add seriously to the strain on the Tanhouse revenues.

Patrick appeared unfeignedly glad to see Claude back again. " Spell Land had been unaccountable dull since Tilda Wellings left," and he evidently thought that the past year would have made his brother a better companion, one more ready to laugh at his unmentionable stories. James said little, either one way or the other. " Now that you've made up your mind to live like an honest man, and come to church on Sundays, and keep out of the pub, I've nothing to say against you," was the uttermost to which he would commit himself.

After supper Claude went upstairs to unpack his traps. Thoughts of contrast were stirred up as he looked round his room, at the high sash-window rattling in the breeze, at the narrow bed, much too small for him, and the wall-paper pattern of brown foliage and blue roses. But he fought them down. He opened his box, and took out such clothes as were not too worn for use, and one or two garments of Emily's that had become teraphim. Poor little Em ! It was sickly sentiment to keep her sunshade, and yet he laid it on the chest of drawers. There was a blouse of hers, too—a gruesome check that would have appalled even Dora—but he had nothing else to remember her by—not a book, not a ring, not a lock of her hair.

He went to the window and looked out. The ship of the moon was floundering in the west, and shadows of clouds sped over the fields. He thought of Nineveh, facing that same moon, with shining windows, and his foolish brain imagined Emily standing among the holly-hocks, waiting for one who would not return. . . .

But he banished the sentimental mood, with its choke and thrill. Now that he knew what sorrow really was, he no longer cooked it at home. Nevertheless, he continued to lean against the window, praying to James's God. He

prayed a great deal now, and found comfort in it. Gilmour had made no effort to interfere with this grim oddity of a faith; he realized that though in James's God Claude did not find his highest, he had found once more a "good bodily image," and perhaps, as so many had done before him, he would receive the blessing vouchsafed to those who bow themselves faithfully in the house of Rimmon, and would pass through the idol's temple to the shrine of the God of Truth.

Gradually, however, the prayer died down in his heart, and he thought once more of Emily; to think of her was not always sorrowful. Of late her life and his relations with her had slipped into a truer and brighter perspective. He saw that their love had gone through two different phases, corresponding with—he was in the mood for the doctrine of correspondences, though he lacked the mixture of active intellect and passive faith necessary to make a Swedenborgian—Doucegrove and Nineveh. When Emily died she had remembered Doucegrove, and he was thankful that no blundering cul-de-sac confession of his had dragged her from the sunshine and the sallows to the mists and yews of Nineveh. The smiles, the playfulness, with which she had said good-bye, the roguery that had leapt into her eyes for the first time on her death-bed, seemed to foretell a playtime. She had had so little play, but surely in that hour she had heard the footsteps of children dancing at the door. She was gone to play—his poor little friend—and he was glad. He was glad for himself as well as for her, for now that she was dead he could think of her in a way which had been impossible while she was alive. While Emily had lived, she had had no power to lift the veil from his self-deception or bring down the axe on his self-will; she had been merely a woman he strove for against right and truth. But now, all the contradictory elements that had weakened the arms she had stretched out to save him lay dead in the grave where her body lay; her womanly frailty and illogicalness, her childish ignorance and lack of judgment, her wild thing's elusiveness and mystery—

all were laid aside like a garment outgrown. The memory of her was a purifying emotion, a generating emotion, not only the strongest in him, but the best in him, and like the best in every man, would raise him up at the last day.

For death had joined what love had put asunder.

The passage clock struck twelve, and there was frost in the wind that blew from Doucegrove. Claude turned back into the room. Emily had gone to play, but he had work ahead of him, and he had better tumble into bed as quickly as possible, and take what rest he could. Ten minutes later he was asleep, his arms and legs flung wide in the abandonment of boyish weariness, his face restored to the youthfulness it had lost in waking hours.

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